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Illustrator
Nanasemeruchi

Are
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Okay
With a
(Slightly)

Older
Girlfriend?

You're
Never Too
Old to Be a
Princess

vol. 5





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You're Never Too

Table of Contents Are You Okay With a Slightly Older Girlfriend?
~You're Never Too Old to Be a Princess~

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Princess's Secret Love Gets Found out

Chapter 2: The Princess Gets Into an Argument

Chapter 3: The Princess Goes to a Love Hotel

Chapter 4: Thumbelina Is Also Doing Her Best

Chapter 5: Princess Kisaki Comes to Stay the Night

Chapter 6: The King and the Prince

Epilogue

Old to Be



THE STORY SO FAR

High schooler Momota Kaoru has a girlfriend twelve years older than him, Orihara Hime, and she has some concerns about their relationship. She was worried that she was the only one in their relationship being spoiled even though she was older. Despite this worry, the night of their first summer festival together quickly brought them closer. "I've always wanted to do this," Momota thought. He had been trying to act like an adult because he's younger, but after he gained the courage to depend on his girlfriend, their bond grew stronger.



Shortly thereafter, Momota was introduced
to a certain someone by his father, Shigeru,
who said, "I'm going to get remarried."
And just who was this bride-to-be?
"Nice to meet you. My name is Orihara Kisaki."



≡ Prologue

“Life is a series of choices.”

So goes the famous quote from the famous playwright William Shakespeare. Well, strictly speaking, they aren’t his words, but rather a line that appears in the tragedy written by him, *Hamlet*—and actually, those words don’t show up in *Hamlet* at all, and were apparently just made up by the internet. At any rate, whether Shakespeare said them or not, I personally think the quote is definitely true and also wise. Life is a series of choices... Anyway, I’ve said all this stuff before.

A few months ago, I was confessed to by a girl in my grade named Ibusuki Saki. Her first confession was terribly condescending and terribly sloppy, but her next confession, the one she gave me on our amusement park date, was terribly earnest. That’s why I was earnest in turn when I turned her down. In my own sincere way, I told her that I couldn’t go out with her because I had a girlfriend and she was the woman I loved.

Choosing someone means not choosing someone else. I chose Orihara Hime, and I didn’t choose Ibusuki Saki. I thought it was arrogant for a guy like me to be choosing people, but maybe I shouldn’t run away from that “arrogance.” If you were to consider even the option of not choosing as a part of choosing, then people can’t run away from choices—and even if they did, there’d be no point.

“Life is a series of choices.”

It goes without saying, but life *is* a series of choices, and the series of choices you make is your life. It wouldn’t be wrong to say that your life is decided by the things and people you choose. Choices are important and precious... At least, they should be. Which reminds me, a long time ago my father told me something that was the exact opposite of that.

“Kaoru,” he began. It was the spring of my third year in middle school, around the time when I had to make a serious decision about what school I wanted to go to—a time when even a middle school student had to think about their

future, in the way that middle school students do. My father and I were having a somewhat serious talk about the future, though it wasn't like it was a very formal discussion or anything. It was on a day when our chiropractic clinic was closed for a national holiday. I was cleaning the clinic, and behind me, my father was organizing medical records when he struck up a conversation like he was making small talk.

"You're really planning on taking over our clinic?" he asked.

"...I am." There was a hint of nervousness in my voice. For generations—well, since my grandfather founded it—my family has run this chiropractic clinic. My father is the clinic's second owner, and ever since I was born, it had been my destiny to become the third. I even received special education to become a worthy successor...

Well, just kidding. That's not true, obviously.

With "help out if you want an allowance" as my reason, I only helped out with really simple chores like cleaning the clinic and washing towels. My father hadn't even once told me to follow in his footsteps. Our older regular customers who live in our neighborhood would often tell him, "The future must be bright, having a worthy successor like that," but my father would just smile politely and vaguely reply, "I wonder about that?"

However, I had made up my mind. As far back as I can remember, I've wanted to take over Momota Chiropractic, this clinic that my dead grandfather and dad have maintained up till now. Perhaps that feeling showed in my everyday attitude, and that was why my father had asked me, "You're really planning on taking over our clinic?" like he was making sure.

"After I graduate high school, I want to go to a technical school for judo therapists. At first, I'll probably do my training somewhere else, but... In the end, I want to work here and follow in your footsteps, dad. I want to protect this place that grandpa started and you took over." My mouth had become dry, and I could feel my heart beat faster. It was the first time I'd had a serious talk about the future with my father. I'd felt a little bit embarrassed—and really nervous. I couldn't help feeling anxious about how my father would react.

Will he be happy that I'm following in his footsteps? Or maybe it'll be the

opposite, and he'll get upset and say, "It's not that easy"?

I wondered what kind of reaction my dad would have to the type of decision and choices that a middle schooler had thought up. I was trembling with fear. However, my dad's reaction was lukewarm.

"Hmm. Is that so? Well, I don't think it'll be easy, but you do your best," was all he said, and he went back to organizing medical records.

"..." Huh? Th-That's his only reaction? Isn't a son following or not following in his father's footsteps a pretty big deal? In a manga or a TV drama, this is where there'd be some kind of conflict, right? Whether I follow in his footsteps or not, isn't this the part where we have a heated father-son argument? I was all pumped up and everything, you know? What's the deal with this weak reaction?

"H-Hey, Dad...?"

"Hmm?"

"Isn't there...anything else?"

"What do you mean, 'anything else'?"

"No, I mean... We're not going to have a heated discussion about my future? Like... You're not going to be against me following in your footsteps?"

"You wanted me to?"

"Not really, no."

"So, did you want me to be excited? Did you want me to say, 'That's my boy!' or something like that?"

"N-No, it's not like that..."

It was embarrassing...because I did kind of feel that way. If I said I didn't want my dad to be excited about it, I'd be lying. Still, that didn't mean I wanted to admit it in front of him.

My father, almost as if he saw through how conflicted I was, said, "Well, it's not like I'm unhappy. My father worked at this clinic for many years before he passed, and I've been working here for many years as well, so I'd feel happy if you were to take over. Dad would probably feel happy too, from beyond the grave."

“...”

“But if you didn’t take it over, that’s fine too. I have no intention of forcing you to do anything with your future. My only job as a parent is to send you to college or specialty school. Everything else is your life. Live the way you want to,” my dad said with a quiet voice. He gave me a gentle smile.

“...”

I didn’t know if he was being generous, being hands off, or just saying whatever he felt like. In any case, it seemed like he had easily approved of my decision. I should have probably felt happy, but to be honest, what I felt was more like disappointment.

“...Sigh.”

“What’s wrong? You sound glum.”

“Of course I am! I thought I made a pretty big decision. I even pictured a lot of different situations where you’d be opposed to it and say stuff like ‘You’re going to college!’ or ‘You don’t have to decide the path your future will take right now,’” I whined.

“Ha ha. Well, it’d be boring to have a dad who said something so common, right?” His voice took on a joking tone. “Whatever path you take, it’s fine as long as it’s the path you chose. Well, if it’s a really horrible and obviously messed up path, I’ll probably stop you, but...your life is yours and not mine. Besides...” He raised his face slightly, like he was looking up at something far away in the sky above. “What you choose in life is actually less important than you think.”

♥Chapter 1: The Princess's Secret Love Gets Found Out

If you were a student, then today was the start of the first weekend after a long, long summer vacation and the start of a second semester. In other words, it was a normal weekend for an adult like me.

It was the early afternoon of the first Saturday in the first week of September, and I was in a café near the station. It was a trendy café that had recently opened, and its pancakes were popular among young women. Apparently, they were “Instagram-worthy.”

“Oh, wow! These look so good!” Komatsu-san squealed in delight from the seat across from me. As soon as the pancakes were placed on the table, she took out her smartphone in a fluid motion and took a ton of pictures with her camera app.

I watched the whole scene in silence. As I thought about how I wanted to hurry up and eat and that it was such a waste that the whipped cream was going to melt, I read the mood and looked on without saying a word. I tried not to make myself stand out and get in the way of her pictures, but eventually, it seemed that she picked up on the unnatural vibes I was giving off.

“Oh. I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” Komatsu-san apologized.

Hmm. It’s not like I was upset about her snapping pictures of her food, and I feel a bit bad that I made her feel guilty and rush because I wasn’t taking any pictures... Still, I’m not going to take pictures just to go along with her. I could have probably killed time by pretending to take pictures, but... I didn’t want to mess something up and have her think “Huh? Why are you taking pictures that way?” There are probably things like special apps and special ways to take these pictures, after all...

“No, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you not on Instagram, Chief Orihara?”

“N-No.”

“Huh, why not?” she said with a really surprised look on her face.

“I-I don’t really have a reason.”

I really don’t. It’s not like I have a strong motive not to have one or some policy against it. I just don’t do it because I don’t have any reason to.

People who don’t participate in social media are the minority lately, though. Times have changed to where you’re asked more why you don’t do it than why you do do it... Well, I totally missed the boat on it. Even if I started now, I’m not sure if I’d be ready or who I should ask about what. Well, strictly speaking, I don’t avoid it entirely. I do use Twitter a little to follow the official accounts of games I like and the accounts of Let’s Players who play those games. Still, I haven’t tweeted even once, and I just look at other people’s tweets. That’s why I’m kind of reluctant to say, “I’m on social media.”

“By the way...we’re not at the office, so it’s a little strange being called ‘Chief.’”

“Oh, that’s right. In that case, I’ll say Orihara-san,” Komatsu-san said with a friendly smile. We then dug into our “Instagram-worthy” pancakes.

From the presentation, it was clear that all of the work went into how the pancakes looked, but they actually tasted pretty good once you tried them. However, as someone close to their thirties, I couldn’t help being concerned about how many calories were in them and thinking about how I’d have to work off what I’d eaten.

Komatsu-san was my junior at work. Ever since she’d joined our company as a contract employee, I’d been in a kind of mentor position for her. She looked like a modern-day adult woman; she looked gorgeous in office casual wear. She was bright and outgoing, knew a lot about current trends, and gave you the impression that she had totally been an extrovert when she was in school. I’m proud to say that I formed a pretty good relationship with her as her superior working in the same department. However, recently that changed...for the better, and not the worse.

If I were to leave out a bunch of details and give a rough description of what

had happened... It was like a television drama about the struggles of a wage slave, titled "Orihara Hime of Middle Management." The project that Komatsu-san had submitted as a contract employee was in danger of being stolen by her superior, so I fought to stop such tyranny. In the end, everything worked out because of the very original twist that an old janitor I was friends with was actually the chairman of our company. Since then, Komatsu-san had become really attached to me.

"That was delicious. This really was a good choice!" Komatsu-san said after she finished eating. She sounded like she was really enjoying herself. "I'd been really curious about this place recently, but I've never had an opportunity to come here. I'm glad I could come here with you, Orihara-san."

"Thank you for inviting me."

"No, thank you very much for accompanying me."

I smiled as we talked, but to be honest, I had complicated feelings about this. I'll be frank: I was the kind of person who only likes to see coworkers when I'm working, and I liked to keep my work and my private life separate. It's like... I didn't want to be reminded of work on my days off. Also, I didn't want my work to be affected by any disputes that I had with coworkers during my private time. The only company drinking parties I kind of participated in were the year-end party and New Year's party, and I definitely didn't go to any after-parties. Even after I got subordinates at work, I'd never asked them out myself. So, I never would have thought that I'd be asked out to lunch by my junior. When she asked me to go drinking, I tried to play it off by saying I'm not really good with alcohol, but she then insisted that we do lunch.

Junior coworkers these days sure are something. I mean, it's not like I hate this. Personally, I like Komatsu-san, so it's not a burden to have lunch together like this. In fact, I'm having a pretty good time. Still... I have this strange feeling in my heart about meeting someone from my office on my day off. Well, I don't have any particular plans, and it seems like Momota-kun had stuff to do today anyway... He didn't tell me the specifics, but it looks like his father told him "Stay home today."

I wonder what he has to do? I have no idea what it could be.

“You look really different in casual clothes, Orihara-san,” Komatsu-san said to me as I was thinking about Momota-kun. “It’s so refreshing since I’ve only seen you in a plain business suit... Oh, I’m sorry. I called your business suit plain...”

“Ha ha. That’s fine.” It didn’t make me mad or depressed. Choosing an outfit is a pain, so I wore a business suit every day. I was already prepared for people to think I’m plain.

“But I’m really surprised. When you called out to me at the station, I was like ‘Who’s this beautiful woman?!’ You weren’t wearing glasses, your hair was silky and straight and not done up, and you were so cute you looked like a different person.”

“H-Hey, you’re flattering me too much!” I was embarrassed, but Komatsu-san got a slightly serious look on her face and stared at me.

“Orihara-san, do you really not have a boyfriend?”

“N-No, I don’t. I told you before, didn’t I?”

“Really? I don’t know... This feels like the kind of style that a woman with a boyfriend would have.”

“...”

She’s so perceptive. I mean...what? Can you really know something like that just by looking? Are adult extroverts able to tell if you have a boyfriend just from your fashion?

“I can’t really explain it, but...your attitude has changed a little bit, Orihara-san. You were always nice, but it’s like you’re nicer now, or you became happier. Specifically, it started around the end of May this year.”

Isn’t she a little too perceptive?! She’s dead-on about when it happened! Is she psychic?! Or could it be... I’m just super easy to read? I wonder if I was so excited about my first boyfriend that I was oozing out happiness at my workplace. Oh man, this is so embarrassing!

“Um, well, the truth is, around that time I met someone nice...”

“Wow, I knew it!” Feeling like I couldn’t deceive her anymore, I confessed to Komatsu-san, and she got a really happy-looking expression on her face.

“D-Don’t tell anyone, okay? I haven’t told anyone yet.”

“It’s okay, I understand. Despite how I look, I’m good at keeping secrets,” Komatsu-san said lightly.

“Seriously... Seriously, don’t tell anyone, okay?” I firmly emphasized to her. “Seriously, please... This is really something that can’t be found out. Coworkers are a given, but I don’t want you to tell your family or friends either. P-Please. I’m begging you, please keep it a secret!” I was in such a panic that my words became heated, but when I thought about it calmly, it might have had the complete opposite effect. As expected, Komatsu-san’s expression became tense.

“I-I understand. I won’t tell anyone,” She nodded firmly, and the look on her face was one of fear.

Just how desperate did I seem when I was making sure she understood?

“W-Well, it’s not really something I can tell people!”

“I-It’s okay, really... Um, I actually have some understanding of that kind of stuff too. They do say that love is more exciting when it’s forbidden. Even if they’re married, you can’t help falling in love with someone...”

“...” Apparently, she thought I was having an affair with a married person. *I’m really not happy about it, but...I guess this is alright. As long as the truth that I’m dating a minor doesn’t get out, then it’s fine. I’ll accept this false charge of infidelity.*

“Okay... Now, let’s have fun today!” Komatsu-san said with a forced smile. “Let’s do something fun together and forget all about our daily worries and problems!”

She’s worried about me... My junior is worried about me because she thinks I’m physically and mentally exhausted from a forbidden love... Wh-What should I do here? I can’t tell her the truth. It’s not like I’m in a romance with no future like an extramarital affair... No, wait.

I’m probably not in a position where I can look down on affairs. Right now, the person I’m dating is a fifteen-year-old high schooler. He’s totally a minor, and our relationship is totally illegal. I’m not in the kind of romance where I can be

proud of myself and criticize adulterers. Our romance isn't just a painful relationship, but one where I don't know what the future holds. No, it's not that I don't know, it's that I'm trying not to think about it. I'm desperately looking away from the reality that I'll have to face one day and running away to those happy moments that felt like a dream.

As my mind started to shift toward anxiety, my smartphone that I'd laid on the table buzzed. I looked and saw that it was a phone call from my big sister. I excused myself and headed outside to answer the phone call.

"Hello, Onee-chan? What's—"

"—Hime, where are you right now?" my sister said, getting right to the point. She didn't even wait for me to finish before she started speaking. Also, her voice was very stern and sharp.

"Wh-What do you mean 'where'? Like I told you yesterday, I'm having lunch with my junior from work."

"Come home right now."

"Huh?"

"I said come home right now," she said, repeating her stern words in a stern tone. I was bewildered by how one-sided she sounded.

"W-Wait. I just finished eating, and we were talking about going somewhere to hang out..."

"It's not work, right? In that case, come home."

"Why? I mean, you had plans too, didn't you Onee-san? I thought you went to your boyfriend's house to introduce yourself..."

My sister had recently gotten herself a boyfriend. From what I'd heard, they were physical with each other before they started dating, so their relationship had a messy start; however, now it seemed they were officially dating. For my thirty-four-year-old sister, dating someone meant talk of marriage wasn't far behind. Fortunately, her boyfriend was someone who was serious about that kind of thing, and when they started dating he'd apparently told her, "I want to go out with you with marriage in mind." However, there was one problem, or a

little bit of an obstacle. I didn't know all the details, but it seemed like her boyfriend was also married in the past and has older children, a daughter and a son. He currently lives with the two of them, so if my sister were to get married to him, she'd end up living with them.

A woman they don't know would suddenly start living with them. It would be quite the challenge for the children, and probably tough for my sister as well. Even though she's never had any children herself, she'd suddenly become the mother of two... Today she said she had plans to meet them face to face and have her boyfriend introduce her to them, and she said that she was going to have lunch at their house, so... huh? I wonder if she's in a foul mood because something bad happened.

"Onee-chan, did something go wrong?"

"Yes. Something did. 'Went wrong' is one way to put it." Then, in a dark voice filled with disappointment and annoyance, she said, "This morning, I was fired up and did my makeup so it looked casual and appropriate for my age and like I wasn't trying too hard. Then I planned out my outfit so it was neat and not too flashy but showed I hadn't forgotten about my feminine side. I did my best to dress up and prepare what I was going to say so they'd think 'I'd be happy if someone like her became my mother.' But it was all ruined. I was barely able to eat, and the conversation didn't flow at all."

"I-I see... It must have been tough."

"Yeah. Thanks to you," my sister said very bitterly.

Thanks to me? What is she talking about? Did I do something?

"Anyway, come home right now. I have something important to talk to you about that concerns your life," my sister said, and the phone call ended there.

What am I going to do? I have no idea what she's talking about. However, I don't think I can just ignore this. There was an unnatural amount of menace in her voice. She must have some kind of unavoidable problem. What in the world could have happened to my sister?

Just as I was deep in thought, my phone buzzed again. This time it wasn't a phone call but a text, and it was from Momota-kun.

“What?!”

I thought my heart would stop. I was so shocked and in despair that I almost fell to my knees right there. It was like my mind went blank, but I gradually understood what was going on. I finally understood why my sister was acting so angry and overwhelmed, and the meaning behind her bitter words.

I understand now. I've been so used to running away from reality that I had accidentally forgotten. The one with the unavoidable problem wasn't her, but me.



They say when humans are truly surprised, they can't even speak. They freeze up and can't react at all. However, strangely, their thoughts speed up so much they get congested. Those thoughts circle around and get tangled up inside of their minds until they can't sort through any of them. They can't even focus on the voices around them and hold a conversation. That's the way it was for me, and it was probably the same for Kisaki-san.

It was the first Saturday of September when my dad told me, "There's someone I'd like to introduce to you." It seemed he wanted to introduce us to the person he was currently dating.

My sister and I both figured this would be good news. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been nervous or hadn't had any reservations about a person we'd never met becoming a member of our family. However, more than that, I felt happy. My dad, who had raised us for over ten years since my mother died, was finally trying to find his own happiness. As his son, I wanted to be genuinely supportive of him. I didn't know what I could do, but I at least wanted to try not to do anything that would ruin their relationship. That was what I thought, and that's why I could never have even dreamed of what happened next.

"N-Nice to meet you. My name is Orihara Kisaki."

Who would have thought that the woman my dad would bring home would be my girlfriend's older sister?

"I've been dating Shigeru-san for a little while now. I know it won't happen right away, but if I could get to know the two of you little by little, I'd—huh? ...What? What?!"

The moment we saw each other, Kisaki-san and I completely froze up. We were so shocked that we couldn't react at all. It was only natural when you consider the way Kisaki-san felt. The person she was dating and intending to marry had children, and when she went to go meet them, one of them turned out to be her little sister's boyfriend. On top of that, it was the boyfriend who she had previously been told was a twenty-five-year-old adult. It's no wonder she'd freeze up and stop thinking. I wasn't able to deal with this sudden development either; I just froze up in shock and couldn't speak properly, let

alone come up with a sensible excuse.

As a result, everything after that was a disaster. The four of us ended up having some delivery that my father ordered for lunch, and...the mood was just horrible. My father and sister, neither of whom knew what was going on, tried to lighten the atmosphere, but Kisasi-san and I could only respond awkwardly. We were restless; we were there in body, but not in spirit. I could barely taste the expensive tempura that my father had splurged on. As for Kisasi-san, she left over half of it unfinished. Eventually, my dad began to worry about Kisasi-san's health, and our introductory lunch ended in a tense mood.

My father took Kisasi-san home and left my sister and me behind. Then, about an hour after our lunch party ended, I got a phone call from Kisasi-san telling me to come right away without telling my dad and sister.



Kisaki-san, Orihara-san, and I were in Orihara-san's apartment, and none of us could manage to break the silence between us. The mood that filled the room was intensely heavy.

Orihara-san had told me she'd be going to lunch with her coworker today, but it looked like she was called here just like I was.

Even though she had plans, she was forcibly summoned here... It's understandable, I suppose: from Kisaki-san's point of view, this must have seemed like that much of an emergency. After all, her little sister's boyfriend, who she thought was twenty-five years old, is actually fifteen.

"...Sigh." After a really long silence, Kisaki-san let out a deep breath. As Orihara-san and I faced her from across the table, that action alone was enough to make us twitch in surprise.

"What should I even say? I'm too shocked to be angry anymore," she continued, her words spilling out like a deep sigh. She had a grim look on her face, like she had gone beyond being mad to being disgusted, and then went beyond being disgusted to having a headache. "So, in the end, the two of you were deceiving me."

"W-We weren't deceiving—" Orihara-san said out of reflex.

"You deceived me. Hime-chan, you lied to our mother and to me," Kisaki-san said, stopping her with a stern voice. "You said that Momota-kun is a twenty-five-year-old adult, after all."

Orihara-san was unable to say anything.

It's just as Kisaki-san said. She deceived her. Also, it wasn't just Orihara-san. I'm just as guilty. I'm just as guilty, and I'm complicit. I didn't deny her lie and got on board with it.

After we had arrived at the apartment, we ended up confessing everything. I felt like we were in a situation we couldn't lie about anymore, so all we could do was tell the truth. That's why...we told her everything about how I was really a fifteen-year-old high school boy.

"You sure piled it on thick with the whole 'rising young star of an IT company'

thing, huh, Hime-chan?”

“...”

“You even said he was an IT elite who’s an expert in programming and computing.”

“C-Computing...?” I couldn’t help taking notice. *I can understand programming, but... computing?*

“Oh, you don’t know about it, Momota-kun?” Kisaki-san said, like she was disappointed. “I guess you really are just a high schooler, if you don’t know anything about computing. If you were involved with an IT company, there’s no way you wouldn’t know about computing,” Kisaki-san said with a huge, smug look on her face.

“...”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but next to me, for some reason, Orihara-san looked like she couldn’t bear it any longer, and in a small voice she said, “...Um, Onee-chan? It’s difficult to say this, but...there’s no such word as ‘computing.’”

“What?!”

“It’s just an IT-esque word that I made up on the spot at our drinking party before...”

“M-Made up?”

“Yes...”

“No way... But I bragged about it all over the place... I even said stuff like, ‘He he, you guys don’t know about computing? You’re so behind the times!’”

“...Sorry.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

Apparently, a lot of things have happened that I wasn’t aware of...

Realizing that she had been spreading false information with a smug face, Kisaki-san blushed bright red with embarrassment. However, she steered the conversation back to the serious, main topic at hand. “Th-The issue isn’t

computering! The issue...is that you're a high schooler and a minor, Momota-kun!"

I deeply lowered my head. I didn't know what I should do aside from that. "I'm truly sorry for lying to you all this time."

"O-Onee-chan! It isn't Momota-kun's fault! It's my fault for lying to you and mom in the first place. Momota-kun just played along with me, so..."

"I'm not saying someone is at fault," Kisaki-san said like she was at her wit's end. "It's not the kind of problem you can fix by apologizing... Seriously, why is something like this happening to me?"

She looked up at the ceiling and held her head in her hands. Her voice was full of anguish. "Just when I thought I had finally, *finally*, found someone nice... Just when I thought that I could become happy this time... Even though Shigeru-san has kids, I thought that I could love them if they were his, and I was determined to do my best to become part of his family... What is even going on? His son is my little sister's boyfriend? Plus, he's a boy I already knew, and someone I thought was a twenty-five-year-old adult? Just what am I supposed to do in this crazy situation?!"

"S-Sorry," I said, once again apologizing to Kisaki-san as she yelled from the depths of her soul. *I guess... I'm sorry for a lot of things.*

"Onee-chan... You said that you met Shigeru-san, Momota-kun's father, in June, right?" Orihara-san asked.

Apparently, my dad and Kisaki-san had first met each other in June, around the time that Kisaki-san had come from her hometown and stayed in Orihara-san's apartment, and it looked like a lot happened between her and dad at the time.

Well, according to what Kisaki-san told me before at the karaoke parlor, they...were intimate on the day that they met. What's more, it was something that Kisaki-san aggressively pushed for... How should I say this? I didn't even want to hear that kind of story about my girlfriend's older sister, and now I know it was about my own dad? Seriously... I really didn't want to know about it...

“If we’re talking about the order things happened in...you met Shigeru-san after you met Momota-kun, right? You didn’t notice anything? Like his last name or his face? I think Momota-kun’s and his father’s facial structures are really similar.”

“How could I have known? I thought that his last name was just a coincidence, and as for his face...”

“As for his face?”

“...I just thought, ‘Hime-chan and I have the same taste in guys! That’s sisters for you!’”

“Huh?” The Orihara sisters blushed in unison, and I also became embarrassed as the mood in the room got kind of awkward.

Well, I mean, I do really resemble my dad. We’re both tall, we both have broad shoulders, and we both have subtle facial features with a rather hard look in our eyes. Like father, like son.

“Wait... Facial structure?” an embarrassed Kisaki-san said as she suddenly raised her head and looked at Orihara-san. “Hime-chan, have you met Shigeru-san?”

“Oh... Y-Yes. But not as Momota-kun’s girlfriend! When I hurt my lower back, I went to his family’s chiropractic clinic as a regular customer.”

“I see. So Shigeru-san still doesn’t know anything about this, after all. Of course he wouldn’t. If he’d known, there’s no way he would have allowed it.”

Slightly, yet surely, her voice lowered, and she said, “Hime-chan.” Then she gave Orihara-san a serious look, and in a cold voice, she said, “Break up with Momota-kun right now.”

The shock I felt upon hearing that was surprisingly minor. In fact, there was even a part of me that had accepted it. In a way, it was the reaction I had expected. It was natural, quite natural.

The reason we’d kept our relationship hidden is because once it becomes public, people would naturally be opposed to it. I’m a fifteen-year-old high school student, and Orihara-san is a twenty-seven-year-old adult. That kind of

romantic relationship between a man and a woman is discouraged in this country. That's why we've continued the way we have been, running away from the reality that we would have to face one day...

"N-No! Why?" Orihara-san shouted.

"What do you mean why? You can't be allowed to have a relationship with a minor," Kisaki-san said firmly. Orihara-san sounded like she was about to cry.

Kisaki-san then let out a deep exhale and said, "I'm shocked too, you know? I thought my little sister had finally gotten a boyfriend and that he was a nice young man... Who would have thought that he was a high schooler? And here I was rooting for the two of you..." Her words tinged with sadness made my heart ache.

That's right. I deceived Kisaki-san. In other words, I betrayed her. I trampled on the feelings of the person who was cheering for us as a couple.

"I-It's certainly true...that I lied to you, Onee-chan. But that doesn't mean that everything was a lie," Orihara-san said in a weak voice.

"..."

"Momota-kun and I are serious about our relationship. That much is true," Orihara-san said, her voice shaking but resolute. Kisaki-san furrowed her brow like she was troubled.

"...Even if that's the case, it's not something that's socially acceptable. Even you understand that much, don't you?"

"I-It's not like I'm paying him money to go out with me, okay? It's not like it's prostitution or I'm his sugar mama. Momota-kun and I are in a serious relationship."

"Even if you're serious, it's an issue legally."

"I-I looked it up, and the law in this prefecture says that as long as no money is exchanged, it's a proper relationship, and if the minor's guardian gives permission, then it's okay."

"But you didn't get permission from Momota-kun's father, Shigeru-san, right?"

“Th-That’s...”

“In that case, this conversation is over. Back off before you cause any more trouble for Momota-kun—no, the Momota household.”

There was no more sound argument, and it crushed Orihara-san. Unable to say anything back, Orihara-san faced the ground. She looked like she was desperately holding back tears.

“Momota-kun,” Kisaki-san said as she shifted her gaze to me. “You understand, don’t you? Your and Hime-chan’s relationship...isn’t something that’s socially acceptable.”

“...”

“If it came to light that Hime-chan was dating a boy in high school, there’s no telling how she as an adult and a member of society would be frowned upon by the public. Without a doubt, she’ll become a target of prejudice and curiosity. It would probably affect her position at her company. And not just Hime-chan: our entire family would probably be looked down upon by society.”

“...”

“Of course, it wouldn’t just be her. I think it would negatively affect your future as well. More than anything, I don’t think that Shigeru-san would be happy about a kid like you dating a twenty-seven-year-old woman.”

“...”

“So... I want you to end it with Hime-chan. Momota-kun, you understand exactly what I’m trying to say, don’t you?” she said in a kind voice, gently persuading me. “You understand, don’t you?” She repeated her words like she was adding emphasis to the question.

She was probably doing this because she trusted me. Before she found out our secret, Kisaki-san supported our relationship and acknowledged me as her sister’s boyfriend.

It may be conceited of me, but I think she thought well of me as a man. Of course, her evaluation of me had probably been backed by my false title of “The rising star of an IT company.” Still, I think she acknowledged my character and

my humanity at least a little bit. So that's why she was pleading with me. She trusted that I understood what she was saying, and she was questioning my sense of decency and common sense.

"It's common sense, isn't it?" she said.

"..." I grit my teeth and strongly clenched my fists, and deep wrinkles formed on my pants.

I knew from the beginning that this is how it would end up. There's no way that the forbidden love of a fifteen-year-old high schooler and a twenty-seven-year-old adult would be celebrated by the people around us. If our relationship were to become public knowledge, Orihara-san would be the one who suffered the consequences. From an outsider's perspective, it would probably be viewed as a situation where an adult had seduced a child. Having a relationship with a minor is more than enough reason for an adult to lose their social standing. That's why, more so than my family, someone from her family would be opposed to it. No one wants a criminal in their family.

What Kisaki-san is saying is correct. There's no sounder argument than hers. Perhaps the time has finally come for us to wake up from our dream. From the beginning, our relationship was dangerous, like we were treading on thin ice. We've only focused on the present as we've dated, and we've diverted our gaze from the future. It's almost as if we had both realized somewhere inside of our hearts that we'd one day break up. We've nurtured our forbidden love fleetingly, cherishing only the current moment.

However, the time has probably finally come. Since our relationship has been discovered by a member of her family—someone staunchly opposed to it, at that—I don't have the courage or the determination to continue dating her.

No matter how you slice it, I'll just make Orihara-san unhappy. There's no telling just how much of a risk my existence will be to Orihara-san. After all, what's the point of breaking up her family just so we can keep dating? If I'm truly concerned for her sake, I should step away. She can't find happiness if she's with me. If I'm thinking about her happiness, I shouldn't be with her.

Yeah, I probably would have thought something like that a while ago. I probably would have used her as an excuse and said something like "If I were

truly concerned for her sake” or “If I were thinking about her happiness” to justify not trying to fight back. However, now...

“No,” I said. My voice was shaking a little, but I definitely said it. I looked Kisasi-san straight in the eye and voiced my refusal. “I don’t want to break up with Orihara-san.”

“What? What are you saying, Momota-kun?”

“I want to continue our relationship.”

“Wh-Why...?”

“Because I love her,” I told a betrayed-looking Kisasi-san. *Why? When you ask me that, there’s only one answer I can give.*

“It’s because I love Orihara-san,” I continued. “I love her, and I want to continue to be with her, forever and ever. I definitely don’t want to break up!” The words flowed from deep within my heart. “I’m aware of the dangers of us dating. Maybe Orihara-san will be unhappy if she stays with me... Still, I want to be together with her.” All the words that came out of my mouth were genuine. They were my true feelings, plain and simple.

On the day of the festival, when Orihara-san’s yukata became undone, I lost control of myself and groped her, then Orihara-san gently embraced me in my foolishness. On that day, I learned how to rely on her a little. I also stopped struggling to look like an adult, and I learned the importance of being myself. That’s why, even in this situation, I wanted to face reality with my true feelings. That’s all a kid like me can do, after all. Since I can’t become an adult no matter what I do, there was no way for me to express to her how serious I was aside from shouting out my selfish desires.

“From here on, Orihara-san is the only person I’ll love. I can’t imagine being with anyone aside from her.”

“I feel the same way, Onee-san,” Orihara-san said to her confused sister. “The difference in our ages doesn’t matter... Or, well, it’d be nice to be able to say that, but that probably isn’t the case. We’ve only been dating for a few months, but...we’ve been through a lot, and there will probably be even greater challenges to come. However, from here on out, no matter what troubles await

us, I want to overcome them together with Momota-kun because...I love him too. I can't imagine being with anyone aside from Momota-kun."

"Orihara-san..." It was like my heart was on fire. The person I loved was thinking the same thing as me. I felt like I could face any challenge with just that.

"...You're joking, right?" Kisaki-san said as she winced and her face twitched. "I can't believe you guys just said such embarrassing things with straight faces."

"..." Hearing how put off she was, Orihara-san and I were overcome with a sudden feeling of embarrassment. It was like all of the heat that built up had dissipated all at once.

I mean... You didn't have to say all that, did you? Cringing like that isn't fair, you know? Like, after being told we were being embarrassing, there isn't anything else we can say...

"Well... I understand how the two of you feel. I can understand believing you'll be together forever because no one could replace the person you love right now, and I get feeling that if you're together you can definitely overcome any challenge," Kisaki-san said while we were too embarrassed to speak. "However, you two don't understand just how fragile and fleeting the 'forever' and 'definitely' that lovers talk about really are." Her words were strong, yet, at the same time, her voice sounded somewhat lonely.

As Kisaki-san stared at us, the look in her eyes gradually became sadder and sadder. "Everyone, every couple...is just like that. When things are going well, they think they can overcome any challenge. They can't imagine being with anybody else and believe that the person they're with is their soul mate. However, that's all just an illusion your mind shows you when you've got love on the brain."

"Onee-chan..." Orihara-san had a look on her face like she was in pain. Without a doubt, the two of them were remembering Kisaki-san's past.

Orihara Kisaki was married before, and there was a time when she had a different last name than Orihara. Up until a few years ago, she had a beloved husband, a partner who she pledged her future to. However, they were no longer living as a married couple. I don't know specifically why they got a

divorce, but I guess there must have been some circumstances that made it impossible for them to continue their marriage any longer. Those two people, who were supposed to have pledged their futures to each other and who should have acquired eternal love through the institution known as marriage, were now walking separate paths through life.

“It happens all the time in real life: people will think they’ve found their soul mate when they actually haven’t. It’s unbelievable how much love can blind you, and I was the same way.” Kisasi-san looked like she was stifling her emotions as she continued to discuss her past. “I thought he was my soul mate, so I got married. We lived together as husband and wife, and we were so happy... But that happiness only lasted for a few years. We started to lose touch with each other as we lived our separate daily lives, and we gradually grew further and further apart. In the end, he cheated on me... I chose the wrong person. I thought the wrong person was my soul mate.”

Kisasi-san looked at us. “This determination you have now, the promises you’re making when you’re all excited from your love and passion... They don’t mean anything.” The gaze she directed at us gradually focused on Orihara-san. “Hime-chan...you’re already twenty-seven. Momota-kun is only fifteen. You’ll never be able to bridge that age gap. If you break up in the future, you’ll be the one who takes the most damage. You understand that, right?” Her tone was stern, but her voice had a kindness to it.

Ultimately, Kisasi-san is probably worried about Orihara-san. As her older sister and a member of her family, she’s worried about her household’s youngest child. I believe all of her sternness is born from kindness. As I was thinking that...

“What? What are you even saying? Why are you assuming that we’re going to break up?” Orihara-san said unexpectedly. “Also, what do you mean about taking damage? What damage?”

“I mean...your value as a woman will be damaged. Breaking up in your twenties is different than breaking up in your thirties.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never even thought about my value. Onee-chan...aren’t you just projecting your own past onto us? Don’t decide that we’re

going to fail just because you did,” Orihara-san said bitinglly. The statement was harsh and totally unlike her. It seemed that being pushed into a corner had made her pretty emotional.

“I-I’m not just talking about my own experience! I’m talking about the world in general,” Kisasi-san objected after also becoming emotional. “If all the couples and marriages could work out, then no one would get a divorce! Do you know what the divorce rate in Japan is? Do you know it’s over thirty percent? That means that for every ten married couples, three will be getting a divorce!”

“And seven couples don’t! The people who don’t get a divorce are the majority!”

“Th-That’s just splitting hairs! Why don’t you get it, Hime-chan? I just don’t want you to become like me!”

“That’s just meddling in my life! I’m already twenty-seven years old, so don’t treat me like a kid!”

“Of course I’ll treat you like a kid! Your romance is like a middle schooler’s! You’ve been dating for four months already, and you still haven’t slept with each other!”

“What?! Th-That has nothing to do with this! I’m different from my slutty milf of an older sister, who does it on the first day she meets someone!”

“Y-You’re calling me a slutty milf again?! Hime-chan, you dummy!” Their emotional argument gradually became more and more childish.

Faced with the sight of two sisters, one twenty-seven years old and the other thirty-four years old, getting upset and insulting one another, I didn’t know what to do. Even so, I couldn’t just leave them alone. But right when I was thinking of how I should stop them, it happened. Right in the middle of their heated argument, Kisasi-san suddenly grimaced. Then she put her hand over her mouth and ran to the bathroom.

“O-Onee-chan?!” Panicked, Orihara-san chased after her and I followed. Kisasi-san hadn’t even closed the bathroom door; she was squatting down and facing the toilet as she vomited. “Wh-What’s the matter, Onee-chan? Are you okay?” Orihara-san said as she rubbed Kisasi-san’s back.

“Th-Thank you, Hime-chan. I-I’m fine...”

“You don’t have a hangover, right? Are you sick?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just something that happens during this stage,” Kisaki-san said while looking pale yet a little embarrassed.

“This stage?”

“Y-You don’t mean...” Orihara-san and I guessed it at almost the same time.

“...Three months,” Kisaki-san said with great difficulty as she touched her stomach.

Three months. I didn’t even have to think about what she meant by that. When a woman who’s dating someone with marriage in mind suddenly throws up and says “three months,” there can only be one answer. Three months—in other words, she’s in her third month of pregnancy.

“H-Huh...” Orihara-san had a complicated expression on her face as she looked both surprised and confused. “That’s, um... C-Congratulations?”

“Th-Thank you, Hime-chan...” Due to the timing of it all, it ended up being an odd celebration between the Orihara sisters.

“...Huh? What? But, Onee-chan, you said three months...” Orihara-san said like she realized something. “Onee-chan, you count how many days you’ve been pregnant starting with the first day of your last period, right?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right.”

“Then, if you’re three months pregnant, that means the day you...were blessed would be around the same time you met Shigeru-san, wouldn’t it?”

“...Yes, it would,” Kisaki-san said, awkwardly looking away. However, she then suddenly raised her face. “I-It’s not what you think, Momota-kun!” she shouted, protesting desperately. “Shigeru-san properly tried to use protection! Your father isn’t some irresponsible man who goes bareback on the first day he meets someone!”

“...”

“It’s just... You know? I-I kind of forcefully... How should I say it?... I went at

him no holds barred.”

“...”

“I was thinking I wasn’t going to let this chance get away from me, so I came onto him with all of my might... It was a really unsafe day for me, but I lied and said that it was a safe day...”

“...” I no longer knew what to say or how to say it. My thoughts and emotions were so overwhelmed that I was completely at a loss. It was like I had frozen up and overheated at the same time and had reached a state of nothingness.

I’m Momota Kaoru. I’m almost sixteen years old. It looks like I’m going to get a new mother at about the same time, and in a crazy turn of events, it turns out that woman is my girlfriend’s older sister. Also, it looks like I’m going to get a new little brother or sister.

≡Chapter 2: The Princess Gets Into an Argument

Since Kisasi-san had been a little unwell from her morning sickness, we'd ended up leaving our talk half-finished.

I was told the child in her belly was growing healthily. Kisasi-san had gotten past the worst of her morning sickness, and she was doing much better.

I suppose I should have been happy. My father was about to get married again, and his partner was with child. Without a doubt, for me it should have been a cause for celebration. Normally, I would have been shaking with joy and would have probably been so excited that I'd start thinking up names for my little brother or sister. Maybe I would have even been rebellious like an adolescent and shown resistance toward my new family...

But with so much going on, I just hadn't been able to be happy or even defiant. I mean, there'd been so many sudden developments that I just couldn't keep up. *Why is this happening? What happened to make things go like this?* I thought. In any case, I was close to the limit of just how much I could handle on my own, so I'd clingily sought out help from my sister.

"...Are you being serious, Kaoru?"

After I had returned home, I called my sister, who was still in the house, to my room and talked privately with her. After I told her about everything that had happened behind the scenes, my sister looked shocked and seemed taken aback.

"Wh-Why are you so wreathed in misfortune? Just when you started going out with a woman twelve years older than you, it turns out her older sister is the person that's going to marry your father? What did you do in your past life?"

"Come on, lay off it." I didn't have the energy to fight back. *Seriously, what did I do wrong in my past life? Until this spring, I felt like I was just a normal high*

school student living an ordinary life.

“Jeez, seriously though? Who would have thought that Kisaki-san was Orihara-san’s older sister?” My sister spoke like she was lamenting as she looked up at the ceiling. “Well, they do look alike, and I thought that since they have the same last name that maybe they were relatives, but... To think she was her actual sister... Seriously, just what are the men of this household doing? Why’d you two have to get in this mess?” she said, sounding disgusted. Afterward, she returned her gaze to me. “So, Kaoru, when you went out after lunch...”

“Yeah. I went to Orihara-san’s apartment because Kisaki-san called me there.”

“Oh, wow... Well, that would happen. From Kisaki-san’s point of view, it must have been a huge shock. I’ll bet she never dreamed that her sister’s boyfriend would show up. So, what did she tell you?”

“...She told us to break up right away.”

“Yeah, she would,” my sister murmured in a solemn voice while nodding gravely. “It’d be a different story if it were me. It’s not every day you find a sister who’s as open-minded and understanding as I am.”

“...”



“That was a joke.”

Apparently, that was a joke. A bad joke. I thought she was serious for a second and got really upset.

“It’s only natural that a member of Orihara-san’s family would be against it. After all, if something were to happen, the one who would get in big trouble would be the adult here, Orihara-san,” my sister said, completely shifting gears and speaking in a serious voice. “Well, whether or not you two got busted, since her twenty-seven-year-old little sister is dating a high schooler, it makes sense she’d try to stop it, not to mention you’re probably going to become her son.”

“...”

“I was just saying as much, but this situation is laughably complicated.”

“Well, for me this is no laughing matter...” The relationships by blood and relationships by marriage in this situation were complicated. If I had to make a relationship chart or a family tree, it would probably be a big pain in the butt.

“Actually, I take back what I said. It seems a lot more likely than ‘probably’ that you’ll be her son. Dad and Kisasi-san’s marriage seems pretty much like it’s guaranteed.” My sister sighed and said, “Did you know that Kisasi-san is having dad’s baby?”

“Yeah... I heard it from Kisasi-san at Orihara-san’s apartment earlier.”

“Is that right? Dad told me after you left the house. He had a bit of a smug face when he said, ‘You’re probably going to have a little brother or sister.’”

“...”

“I suppose it’s a happy and joyful occasion, but... it’s kind of awkward,” my sister said with an awkward expression. “I can’t believe my father is going to have a shotgun wedding.”

“I hear it’s more polite to call it an ‘unexpected opportunity’ these days.”

“No, no. I feel like ‘unexpected opportunity’ didn’t catch on as much as people thought it would, so in the end they just went back to saying ‘shotgun wedding.’ I get the feeling that people use ‘shotgun wedding’ as a neutral phrase these days.”

“Really? Yeah, well, I don’t really care.”

“Yeah, either way, it doesn’t change how awkward this is... Seriously, what are you doing, dad? You’re old enough to know better. Don’t let your sex drive get the better of you...”

As a daughter whose dad was in this situation, she’d probably gotten some ideas about what had happened, and she looked like she had some complicated feelings. Since I knew a lot of behind-the-scenes details—and as a fellow man—I probably should have done my best to defend my father and say, “No, you got it wrong. In fact, it was Kisaki-san who actively went no holds barred. Dad is more the victim here.” Or something like that. Yeah, I probably should have explained things for the sake of my father’s honor, but I didn’t have the energy to do it now. Yeah...things were a bit of a mess, so my hands were tied.

“It’s not like the kid makes it binding, but those two getting married is probably a done deal. Either way, if dad doesn’t marry her, I’ll never forgive him. He got someone pregnant, so he needs to take responsibility for his actions.” My sister sounded fed up but also somewhat determined. “With that in mind...Kaoru, I’m sorry, but I can’t take you and Orihara-san’s side.”

“...What?”

“Well, I’m not going to actively work against you, but I have no intention of making any moves to protect you guys either. What I’m going to prioritize the most here is dad and Kisaki-san’s relationship. More specifically, I’m going to prioritize our new family member that Kisaki-san is carrying.”

“...”

“If dad and Kisaki-san’s relationship doesn’t work out and our household doesn’t find some kind of stability, then I’ll feel sorry for the child that’s about to be born. That’s why I’m going to consider that child’s future and our family’s peace as my top priorities. I’m sorry, but...I can’t put you guys first.”

“I see.” I nodded at her words like I had made up my mind. “That makes sense... Yes, I understand. That’s what you should do, Nee-chan.”

My sister’s declaration was refreshing. Honestly, there was a part of me that had hoped that when she knew the situation, she would support us and take

our side. However, that would have just been me being spoiled by her. What she said was correct.

If anything, I was proud of her. As her younger brother, I was proud of her for putting our household first and refusing to waver. Also, thanks to her being so clear about it, my eyes had been opened, and I'd steeled my resolve. *This is a problem we need to face as a couple. However we resolve it, we'll do it together.*

"That's my big sister for you. With a splendid eldest daughter like this, I'm sure our household will be fine."

"Whatever. You do your best as the eldest son too, Kaoru." We both laughed; the eldest daughter of the Momota family's scolding had reached the eldest son of the Momota family loud and clear.

≡

It was Monday; a new week had once again begun. My worries were endless, but I still had to go to school on the weekdays since I was a student.

Still, even knowing that full well, simply getting over everything wasn't so easy, so I spent the morning stressing about my family situation.

While we were having our lunch in the usual empty classroom during break, Kana asked me a question. "By the way, what is your class going to do, Momo?"

"What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? I mean what your class is going to do for the school festival, of course."

"Oh, that."

At our school, Seizan High School, we have a school festival in October. The festival was about a month away, so it was time for every class and club to start thinking about what kind of attraction they were going to put together.

During fourth period before lunch break today, all the grades had a homeroom meeting about the school festival. Each class decided who would be their representative, and from there they each discussed what they'd be doing for the festival along with each classmate's role.

Our class had this meeting as well, but...I didn't really say anything, and I just

raised my hand for a safe choice that it seemed like everyone else would choose. Homeroom ended without me really standing out. I'd never really been the type to actively take part in classroom activities in the first place, but I was more concerned with other things at the moment beyond the festival.

"My class decided to do a yakisoba restaurant by majority vote," I told Kana.

"Hmm, that's a safe choice."

"A lot of the people in my class are quiet types, so not a lot of them were really interested in something like a school festival. It took us a long time to decide who was going to be our representative."

"Ha ha ha. Well, we're still in our first year. Unlike the upperclassmen, we don't know what we're doing, so we can't help being passive. In my class, everyone tried to push the representative role onto each other, and in the end...I ended up being the one chosen. It didn't feel like a situation where I could refuse either."

"That sounds rough."

School representatives for the school festival are, just as the name suggests, representatives from each class. They communicate with the student council and the festival planning committee, attend various meetings, and work hard to make their class's attraction a success. It's the kind of position that leaves you fairly busy for the whole next month, it doesn't look as good on your permanent record as being on the festival planning committee, and it doesn't have anything going for it aside from being "fulfilling": simply put, most people don't want to do it.

If someone *is* going to do it though, they have to be a central figure in their class. So, in a sense, it was inevitable that Kana would be selected. He was a good-looking guy with good communication skills, he was an extrovert among extroverts, and what's more, he doesn't belong to any clubs, so of course everyone would want Kana to do it.

"Well, since I'm going to do it, I'm going to do my best. My class is going to be making pancakes, so I think it could turn out pretty fun depending on how we do it. If we make something that looks good on social media, it should attract a lot of girls, which will in turn attract a lot of boys."

“Hmm, I see. Well, good luck with that.”

“You don’t seem to really care, Momo,” Kana said with a smirk.

“To be honest, I’m not really thinking about the school festival.”

“Ha ha ha... Well, I know how you feel. Actually...no, I don’t. I can’t imagine how it would feel to have my girlfriend’s older sister become my stepmother.” Kana laughed awkwardly and shrugged. “Seriously, what kind of star were you born under, Momo? What did you do wrong in your past life?”

“My sister said the same thing...”

I’d reported the mess that happened with Kisaki-san to Kana and Ura in a group text yesterday. Well, it was less like a report and more like a counseling session—and less like a counseling session and more like I was simply complaining.

“I’d love to support you, best friend of mine, but...I honestly have no idea how to do that.” Then, with a far-off look in his eyes, Kana sighed and said, “Goodness. I thought when you got a girlfriend, it would be fun to give you advice as your senior in romance. But every situation you bring up is more than a high schooler can handle.”

“...”

“I don’t think there’s a lot of high schoolers who have relationships like yours, Momo.”

“I’ll bet,” I said while smiling wryly at his sarcastic comment.

The situation really is getting crazy, I think. Up till a few months ago, I was your run-of-the-mill high school boy whose number of years without a girlfriend equaled their age.

“By the way, what happened to Ura?” I asked.

“Oh, it seems like his meeting is running long, but it should be about time for it—”

“I can’t believe that woman!”

Speak of the devil...

Suddenly, Ura entered the empty classroom, yelling in a booming voice. The look on his baby face was one of intense anger, sadness, and anxiety. “Ugh. Damn it! This is crap. Why do I have to have something so unfair happen to me?” He walked toward us with a complex expression on his face, a strange mixture of indignation and sadness.

“Wh-What’s the matter, Ura?” I asked, panicked.

“...I was made the class representative for the school festival!” he replied tearfully.

“Wh-What did you say?!” I was so shocked my voice trembled. “The class representative?! Y-You?”

“Yeah...”

“H-How did such a tragedy happen?”

Ura’s an introvert among introverts. You’d expect him to condemn an activity like a school festival with utter cynicism. A guy like this was somehow chosen to be his class’s representative?

“All of it... All of it is that woman’s fault!” Ura had tears in his eyes and his face was twisted with rage as he complained. “I was just trying to not stand out like always. I really think it’s stupid how those friggin’ extroverts get excited for dumb school events, but I’m not childish enough to get mad about it. I’d feel sorry for them if I didn’t tag along with them, so I thought I’d be generous and accept the work assigned to me.” Ura did his best to sound superior when talking about the usual practice during school festivals of “I did it because I was told to” that probably every average student in Japan was guilty of.

“So...what about ‘that woman’?”

“By ‘that woman,’ do you mean Ibusuki?”

“Yeah! That damn woman!” Apparently, Ibusuki was the cause. Lately, whenever Ura talked about a girl, it was Ibusuki Saki. “At first, she was chosen as the class representative. Then, when the time came to choose a guy representative...she turned to me and said, ‘Urano, let’s do it together. You’re free, aren’t you?’ all carelessly with that thoughtless look on her face, like she didn’t realize how much of a serious crime she was committing!”

“Oh, so that’s how it happened, huh...” I mused.

“Well, Saki-chan is probably a suitable person for class representative. She has a lot of friends, she’s cheerful, and she’s a leader,” Kana added.

Ura was at his wit’s end. “Damn that woman. Just what the hell is she thinking? Ugh, and the class’s reaction when I was nominated... It was like their eyes were saying, ‘Huh? Why this guy?’ Why do I have to be humiliated like this?!”

There was no end to Ura’s complaining. Well, I could imagine how he felt. Ibusuki probably didn’t have any bad intentions, but from Ura’s point of view, he must have felt like he was being publicly humiliated; when he saw everyone in the class making faces like “Wait, that guy’s in our class?” through the lens of his persecution complex, it’s only natural he’d feel like a laughingstock.

“What’s more, our class’s attraction is going to be...a maid café.”

A maid café, huh? It came up as a suggestion in my class too. I figured some class would definitely end up doing it.

“A maid café being done by a bunch of damn extroverts at a school festival is the height of stupidity. Even though they normally look down on otaku culture, when it comes to events like this, they suddenly flip the script and get all close to you. I guarantee that they’ll put on crappy cosplay and go, ‘Jeez, I’ll bet gross otaku get turned on by this stuff, don’t they? “Moe moe kyun,” right?’ as they look down on otaku.”

“W-Well, this is good in a way, isn’t it? Since it’s a maid café, you’ll be able to have a bit of an active role, won’t you? Ibusuki was probably expecting that when she chose you, after all.”

“That! That’s the most frustrating part!” Urano yelled. “Screw her thinking that I know all about maids and stuff just because I’m an otaku! Don’t just assume that every otaku likes maids! I haven’t even been to a maid café! I’m not that kind of otaku!”

Urano Izumi was a guy generally accepted as an introvert and an otaku. However, his love as an otaku wasn’t directed at moe culture, but rather things like games, figurines, and robot anime. It wasn’t that he hated so-called moe

culture, but he wasn't that familiar with it.

"S-Still...you know more about it than regular people, right? Some time ago you talked passionately about the history of maid uniforms, didn't you?"

"I'm tormented by having incomplete knowledge, and I don't want to show it off to anyone... If I'm going to do it, I don't want it to be a simple cosplay cafe, but something that delves thoroughly into the cultural history of maids. However, I'm afraid that if I'm thorough my classmates will think, 'Isn't this guy annoying? What's with the sudden enthusiasm?'"

God, he's got such a difficult personality.

"Come on, calm down, Ura," Kana said in a gentle voice. "I became a class representative too."

"R-Really?!"

"If there's a meeting or something, I'll have your back."

"I'm begging you! If there's a meeting of the representatives or something, don't ever leave me alone! Make sure you sit by me and don't talk to anyone else!"

"I-I don't know if I can promise that much." Kana started to look put off as Ura began to completely rely on him. And then, that's when it happened.

"Ah, I found you, Urano!" Ibusuki appeared, and when she caught sight of Ura, she quickly entered the empty classroom. "Jeez, you promised that we'd talk about the school festival during lunch, didn't you? Why did you run away?"

"I-I'm not running away! And that promise was just you ordering me to do it!"

"Whatever, just come here."

"Wh-Why? What about lunch?"

"We can talk while we eat."

"Huh? Wh-Why do I have to have lunch alone with you?"

"...What are you so worried about?"

"I-I'm not worried about anything!"

“Oh man, you’re such a pain in the butt.” Ibusuki sounded utterly fed up as she grabbed Ura’s hand and pulled him away.

“Come on, we’re going.”

“L-Let go of me! Damn it! Kana! You better have my back! You too, Momo! Do your best to support my mental health until the school festival! If I stop coming to school, it’s you guys’ fault!” Ura was dragged away by Ibusuki as he whined and cried out.



“Seems like he’s got his hands full.”

“Still, it seems like he’s having fun,” Kana said knowingly, in contrast to my expression of sympathy.

“Having fun?”

“He was cursing like he usually does, but all in all, I think he’s enjoying himself. Since he’s been chosen as a class representative, he has a legitimate excuse to be alone with Saki.”

“Oh...”

Yeah, I remember talking about something like that. Kana said before that Ura and Ibusuki were getting along well. The two of them—actually, the three of them, when you count her little brother—went to the summer festival together as well. I’m curious about how they’re getting on, but I couldn’t confirm anything with Ura. If I were to ask him, his personality would definitely keep him from saying his true feelings.

“For Saki-chan to do something like nominate Ura as her partner, she must have feelings for him. Whether those are feelings of love or friendship, I don’t know yet... Ha ha. It looks like this school festival is going to be fun.”

“...I hope so.”

“So, make sure you enjoy yourself too, Momo,” Kana said. Then he looked directly into my eyes and said, “I understand you have a much older girlfriend, are struggling with really special circumstances, and have to push yourself and become an adult. However, it would be sad if you ignored your school life just because of that.”

“...”

“An adult romance with Orihara-san is nice, but it’d also be nice if you cherished your childish youth with us.”

“Kana...”

My heart ached at his words that stung like nails. *It’s just as he says. Since I’ve been prioritizing Orihara-san lately, I’ve probably been ignoring everything else.*

After all, I had been seriously considering the option of dropping out of school and working to get out of my current situation... I thought that, even if I couldn't do anything about being a minor, I could do something about my position as a student. If I were to drop out of school, I could become a working adult. Of course, after some consideration, I ended up rejecting that option. I was sure that no one would want me to quit high school: not Orihara-san nor my friends and family would want that. It probably wouldn't have made anyone happy if I had completely given up on being a child.

Everyone wants me to enjoy my youth as a child. I'm sure I'd be happy that way, and I'm sure there wouldn't be any greater blessing. I know that. I know that... But still...

"...I understand. Even I want to enjoy my youth as a student," I said, like I was telling myself. *I know. I get it. Right now, I should be a kid. I should enjoy my youth as a child, in a privileged environment and under the protection of adults.* "But the thing is... I can't imagine my youth without Orihara-san anymore."

No matter how much I thought about it, that was the one thing that never changed. Her being there gave meaning to my youth for the first time in my life; I felt that way from the bottom of my heart. I probably felt that way because love was making me blind, but even still, I wanted to embrace that blindness.

"...I thought you'd say that," Kana said, laughing as if he was exasperated.



It was nighttime after school had ended, and I had just come home. My sister wasn't here today because she had a university drinking party, so it was just my father and I eating together. The meal for the evening was ready-made meals I randomly bought at the convenience store. It wasn't like my father or I couldn't cook, but our family usually just bought ready-made meals when the three of us weren't together.

"Kaoru, do you have a minute?" When I was about halfway through my barbecue-style meal, my father looked at me strangely and started talking to me. "Actually, it's about Kisaki-san."

"Oh, okay..."

“She’s going to come over and cook for us this weekend.”

“...”

“And she’ll probably go ahead and stay the night...”

“...” I was at a loss for words, and I probably had a really negative look on my face. *After all the friction between Kisaki-san and I, it would be awkward facing her now. Just having a meal with her was hard enough, but having her stay over? Just how am I supposed to spend the night with her? Since dad doesn’t know what’s going on, he’s probably thinking something like his adolescent son is just showing opposition toward the new mother that he brought home.*

“O-Of course, I’ll turn her down if you two don’t want her to do that. You don’t have to force yourself. I want you and Kaede to be my first priority. If there’s something on your mind, don’t hold back and please tell me,” my dad added a little nervously.

“No, it’s fine. I was just a little surprised,” I said. It was the only thing I could say. The things on my mind, the things I was hiding...there was no way I could say them.

“Really? That’s a relief.” My father exhaled like he was utterly relieved. “I want Kisaki-san to get used to this house little by little. With what’s to come, it’d be best if it happened as quickly as—”

“Dad. Are you...planning on getting remarried to Kisaki-san?” I asked to confirm my understanding.

“...Yeah.” With an expression that was part embarrassed and part serious, my dad nodded. Then, with difficulty, he said, “I’ve already told Kaede, but the truth is... Um, how should I put this... Kisaki-san is already pregnant with my child...”

“O-Oh, really? That’s great,” I said, trying to react like it was my first time hearing it. *The truth is I already know, though. What’s more, I heard it from Kisaki-san herself.*

“Also, I just want to say... I’m not marrying her because she got pregnant, okay? Kisaki-san and I are in a serious relationship, and after giving proper thought to each other’s future, we decided to have a child. I’m telling you this a

little late, but it's not because we did things out of order. Nothing was ever in the wrong order."

"I-I see." Oh man... He's lying. My dad is totally lying so he looks good in front of his son. The truth is that on the day he met her, Kisaki-san said it was a safe day, she went at him no holds barred, and he succumbed to her temptation. This is hard to hear... I wish I could just be fooled and not realize that this is a lie.

"The child is about three months along. It'll be a little while until it's born, but...until then, I want to make life with Kisaki-san stable."

"That's right... It'd be hard if things got hectic after the baby was born. So that means... Kisaki-san is going to eventually live here, after all?"

"That's what I want." My father nodded.

I suppose it was inevitable. If you're planning to get married and you're gonna have a kid together, it's only natural for you to live together too.

"Kisaki-san is also for living here. Right now, she lives at home and only works part-time at a restaurant. She said she'd be willing to quit her job and move in here when it's okay with us."

"Restaurant"? Doesn't Kisaki-san work at a snack pub in her hometown?

Oh... This is another one of those adult lies. Either Kisaki-san is lying and telling my dad that she works part-time at a restaurant, or my dad knows the truth and is hiding it from me. Wow... I kind of hate this. Since I know the behind-the-scenes details, I see through the lies and deceit. I wish I didn't know anything and could just fall for it...

"This weekend she'll just be staying the night, but by next month—or, at the latest, the month after that—I'd like for her to be able to live here."

Next month or the month after that, huh? It's sooner than I thought, but if you consider that a child is going to be born around seven months from now, it's probably on the late side. She'll likely go back to her hometown before and after the birth, but after that, she'll probably raise the child in this house.

Kisaki-san said that she didn't have a child with her ex-husband, so for her this should be her first time giving birth to and raising a child. It's bad enough that

she probably has a lot of worries and anxiety, but there's no telling what kind of effect significantly changing the living environment would have on the mother and child. I think it would be best for Kisaki-san if she got used to this house as soon as possible. This house is completely foreign to her right now, after all.

I understand my dad's desire to make it feel like home as soon as possible so well that it hurts...and my sister probably feels the same way. I should probably make Kisaki-san the focus when I think about everything.

However, right now there's another woman I have to take care of. She's someone who I have to care for on a different level from my new mother and my new little brother or sister. Before I start living together with Kisaki-san a month or two from now, I better do something about Orihara-san and me. It'd be too awkward if we lived together in a difficult situation like this. More importantly, it would be bad for Kisaki-san's health during her pregnancy. I feel like we're totally a source of stress for her, so I'd like to fix that as soon as I can—

"What's wrong, Kaoru?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing. I was just thinking it must be rough for Kisaki-san since she has to move by herself to a place she's unfamiliar with."

"That's right. But apparently she often comes to this area to have fun. Apparently, her little sister works at a company around here. They've always been close, and even now she stays over at her house, it seems."

"R-Really?" I know about that. I even know the address if you want it. After all, I've hung out there a bunch of times. "K-Kisaki-san's little sister, huh? I-I wonder what kind of person she is?"

"Kisaki-san said that unlike herself, her sister is shy and quiet. On her days off, she stays home all day and plays video games, apparently."

I know she does. If you want to hear about it, I even know the types of games she plays. I also know that even though she likes video games, she's bad at games that test your reflexes, she's a super casual gamer, and she's the type of person who hates playing with people on the internet she doesn't know. I also know that lately she's gotten hooked on the video game let's plays that she used to avoid.

“Oh yeah, now that I think about it, she also said that recently her sister had gotten a boyfriend.”

“W-Wow! Y-You don’t say!”

“She said that he’s a member of the elite who works at a major IT company. She sounded happy about how she was glad her little sister had found the right man.”

“...I-I see.” My stomach was in knots. I didn’t know if it was guilt or nervousness, but a vague sense of danger was assaulting my stomach.

“I heard he’s involved in computering. Do you know about computering, Kaoru? Computering is work that’s related to important programs that play a central role in computers, you know?”

“...”

I-It’s spreading! The tiny lie that Orihara-san said is gradually spreading. The mysterious new word “computering” has spread to the generation that doesn’t understand computers, and everyone is believing it without question.

This is so embarrassing! Oh man... What even is this unpleasant feeling? It’s so awkward the way my dad is smugly talking about this made-up information. I mean, this whole thing is awkward.

I can’t take it. I really have to do something about this. This isn’t something I can just blow off. I have to fix this as soon as possible.

“...Hmm?”

As I was seized by my sense of danger, my smartphone buzzed inside my pocket. When I looked, I could see that it was a text from Orihara-san. It was an urgent invitation that said, “Can you come right now?” It was a terribly straightforward text that felt more urgent than curt.

Panicked, I texted, “I can, but did something happen?”

Then what came was an unexpected response: “I got in an argument with my sister and ran out of my house.”

I guess I should have been impressed with how much of an adult Orihara-san was. Even though she'd said "ran out," it wasn't like she had lost her cool and ran out of the house with just the clothes on her back. Instead, she had the bare minimum of her possessions with her, like her purse and her cosmetics. Also, she'd left in her car. To me, it felt like driving your car after getting in a fight was such an adult living in a rural town thing to do.

"I mean...even though it's your apartment, you were the one who left, Orihara-san?"

"That's right! That's messed up, right?! Even though it's my apartment, why do I have to be the one who leaves?!"

"Still...you left voluntarily didn't you, Orihara-san?"

"Th-That is true... But it's my sister's fault too! She said, 'If you can't listen to what I say, then leave right now!' like it was her apartment..."

"..."

"I lost my temper and said, 'Fine! I'm never coming back to this apartment again!'...even though it's my apartment...and I'm the one paying rent..." Orihara-san looked dissatisfied with the situation as we sat in her beloved Nissan Cube. After we'd texted each other, we met at the same large convenience store parking lot we always did. Orihara-san didn't seem that sad as she sat in the driver's seat, but...it looked like she had been crying.

"So, was your argument about...?"

"...Yeah. It was about you and me," Orihara-san groaned. She then reluctantly said, "This weekend, my sister is going to cook for your family, right?"

"It seems like that's the plan."

"That's why my sister asked me to teach her how to cook. It isn't like my sister can't cook, it's just that I'm a little better at it than she is. Apparently, my sister has been getting spoiled at home recently and hasn't been cooking at all either... But all of that was probably just an excuse."

"An excuse?"

"An excuse to come to my apartment and...talk about the future."

“...”

“I somehow guessed that was the case, and I figured it would be a good opportunity to talk with her. I thought if I talked about it calmly with her, surely she would understand.”

Sensing her sister’s intentions, Orihara-san prepared an opportunity to have a discussion with her, because she thought if they talked it over her sister would see her side of things. However, Kisaki-san perhaps had the same idea and wanted to do the same thing. Without a doubt, they were both thinking, “If I talk to her, she’ll understand that my point of view is correct.”

“After the cooking was done, my sister initiated the conversation. I thought we were talking peacefully at first, but gradually we got emotional, and...in the end, the conversation had become more like an argument.”

The anguished look on her face made my heart ache. *Maybe it was only natural that their discussion got out of hand. They both thought if they talked it over then the other would understand. They’re sisters; because they both trust each other and sincerely want to be on the same side, they get frustrated and butt heads when they don’t understand each other. The fact that they don’t want to fight might be why they fought in the first place.*

“In the end, my sister wanted me to break up with you. No matter how much I talked to her, she didn’t understand me at all,” Orihara-san said like it was a death sentence.

I guess Kisaki-san’s stance on the matter was quite firm. Of course it was. When you think about it sensibly, Kisaki-san is the one who’s overwhelmingly in the right.

“My sister got pretty mad and said, ‘If you won’t listen to me, then maybe you’ll listen to mom and dad’...”

“...” In a way, that was probably inevitable. Kisaki-san probably didn’t want to make things difficult, but if she couldn’t persuade Orihara-san, then it was only natural that she’d turn to her parents. There’s no way her parents would allow their twenty-seven-year-old daughter to date a high schooler.

“Then we got into a fight and I ran out...so I don’t know what happened. M-

Maybe...she's already told my mom and dad about us..."

"I-It's okay. I'm sure that Kisaki-san was just going back and forth with you. She wouldn't contact your parents all of a sudden..."

My words were so hollow that I hated it. I was just saying "It's okay" without any proof that it actually was. The fact that that was all I could say was truly frustrating.

"I'm sorry Momota-kun. This is my fault."

"No... It's my fault since I'm a minor."

"No! You didn't do anything wrong, Momota-kun!" Orihara-san pushed back strongly as I complained. "Um... I did it first, but let's stop apologizing for our age difference. It's not like it's our fault."

"...You're right. I understand." It was just like Orihara-san was saying. It would be easy to act like a victim and run away by apologizing, but that wouldn't solve anything. I wasn't to blame, and neither was Orihara-san. Also...Kisaki-san wasn't to blame either. We had to fight this in a world where no one was to blame.

"Anyway, what shall we do for tonight?"

"...I don't want to go home. If I see my sister, we'll just fight again."

"But don't you have work tomorrow, Orihara-san? If you stay the night somewhere..."

"Yeah... I'd have to sneak back home early in the morning since I didn't bring my business suit with me."

"I see... Well, a manga cafe...would be dangerous, so maybe a hotel—"

Suddenly, Orihara-san reached over from the driver's seat, grabbed the sleeve of my shirt, and gave it a light tug. When I turned to her, she was looking straight at me. Her eyes were shaking with uncertainty, but she also had a look of determination about something. Then, in a voice that made it sound like she had cast off her doubts but was still a little high from how nervous she was, she asked, "Momota-kun...is it okay if you stay out late tonight? I-I want to go somewhere where we can be alone together."

My eyes widened involuntarily, and I was speechless. Orihara-san's face was bright red, and she seemed embarrassed, but she kept staring at me without looking away.

"Does that mean..."

"...Yes."

"It means what I think it means...?"

"...Yes." After nodding the same way twice, Orihara-san grabbed my hand instead of my sleeve. It was like she was refusing to let go as she intertwined her fingers with mine.

≡Chapter 3: The Princess Goes to a Love Hotel

Love hotels in rural cities are usually found in downtown areas near train stations or along highways. When you're driving, the latter is definitely the more convenient option: the streets downtown are complicated and crowded with people, so it's pretty difficult for someone who's not used to them to drive there. On top of that, most hotels along the highway have a parking lot, and you can enter the premises without being seen while driving your car... I guess. I mean, that sort of thing naturally isn't really in my wheelhouse, so all of that is just stuff I learned on the internet.

While I gave Orihara-san directions from the passenger seat, Orihara-san drove the car till we were close to the interchange. We were a little confused by the entrance, but somehow we managed to get into the parking lot of the hotel. We then got out of the car and went inside the building.

"I've never been to a place like this..."

"It's my first time too..."

"But you knew where it was, Momota-kun?"

"Yeah, that's just because...I was prepared."

"Prepared?"

"Also...when I was in middle school, I was curious, so I rode on my bike to look at the outsides of the hotels around here... D-Dumb boys in middle school just do stupid stuff like that sometimes."

"Hmm... It must be tough being a boy in middle school."

"It is. Being a boy in middle school is tough... Oh, this is probably the panel where we select our room. O-Orihara-san, do you have a preference?"

"Wh-What? I-I don't know. You choose, Momota-kun."

"I-I don't know either..." Despite both of us being awkward about it, we somehow chose a vacant room. When we pressed the button, the light on the

panel disappeared, and that probably meant that we'd finished selecting our room.

After this, it should be okay to go get the key from the reception counter... As I desperately tried to awaken the knowledge I had looked up on the internet some time ago, I did my best to take the lead for Orihara-san. At the counter—which was set up to where the receptionist's and our faces were hidden from each other—we received our key. After that, we took the elevator and headed for the room we'd selected.

"Wow, so this is the room in a love hotel..." Orihara-san said, sounding both excited and shy as she entered the room. "It's way more normal than I thought it would be... I had this image in my head that the bed, the wallpaper, and everything else would be pink."

"It seems that those places are a thing too, but apparently this place mostly has regular rooms. This place is apparently relatively new, so the rooms are clean and popular with women..."

"...You really are prepared, aren't you, Momota-kun?"

"No, I mean..." Orihara-san had grinned at me as she said that, and I became embarrassed. I'd done a lot of research on the internet beforehand, but this was, of course, my first time entering a place like this. The room was decorated in beige and black and had a relaxed atmosphere. Like Orihara-san had said, it looked like a normal hotel room at a glance, but the large bed in the middle of the room and the machine for paying for your bill in the room's entranceway stressed that this was a special hotel. Yes, a special hotel for certain, special activities...

"..."

"..." After putting down our bags and putting our outerwear on hangers, we were speechless. A nervous silence took over the room, and we both fidgeted as we looked around the room and pointlessly messed with the cups and hair dryer that were there.

"M-Momota-kun," Orihara-san said, her shrill voice breaking the silence. "I-I'm going to take a shower first."

“Oh, yeah. O-Okay.” Orihara-san took out her makeup pouch from the bag she brought from home and disappeared into the bathroom. After I was left alone, I felt my entire body relax, probably because the tension had disappeared. I fell backwards onto the bed, and with my arms and legs outstretched, I looked up at the ceiling. “Wh-What am I supposed to do here...?”

I’d come this far tonight by just going with the flow, but I honestly still didn’t understand how all this had happened. I was more confused than excited. Honestly, I felt like this wasn’t the time to be doing this type of thing, but when she told me, “I want to be alone together,” refusing wasn’t an option.

When we just started going out and I stayed the night at Orihara-san’s apartment, even though the mood was there, everything ended in a mess. But today is completely different. Today, Orihara-san clearly approached me. She was nervous, but it looked like she had made up her mind. I don’t think it’s going to be a situation where she gives up halfway like last time. Here, today, we’re going to cross that line together...

“...” When I thought about it again, my brain began to spin from how anxious and excited I was. *Still...I don’t get it. There’s something about Orihara-san’s thinking that I just can’t read. Why now, of all times, was she so uncharacteristically assertive in proposing we come here? Was she thinking that she’d distract herself from the fight with Kisaki-san and the harsh reality that was approaching us by coming here with me to...you know...do some happy activities? Or could it be that the harshness of reality has made her desperate? Or perhaps...*

“It can’t be.”

Is she planning on making this the end?! She might be trying to make one last memory before she leaves me. What if, after only giving each other our first times, she ends our relationship?

“...”

No, I’m thinking too negatively about this. As I was agonizing over those thoughts, I heard the door to the bathroom open.

“S-Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Orihara-san walked toward me, and it felt like my heart would stop when I saw what she was wearing. She had lightly wrapped herself in one of the hotel's amenities, a piece of loungewear that looked like a bathrobe. I couldn't help looking at her voluptuous breasts that she couldn't hide even if she tried. They pushed up on the thin fabric as if to make their presence known. Her barely visible cleavage was so deep. Her skin was slightly red and a little sweaty. It was obvious that she wasn't wearing a bra. She probably wasn't wearing any underwear either.

She was so sensual after getting out of the bath that all the negative thoughts I'd had just now were blown away. My confusion and panic were crushed by how overwhelmingly excited I was.

"H-Hey... You're staring too much, Momota-kun."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Come on now..."

"Um. W-Well, I'll go take a shower right away." I stood up and headed for the bathroom as I felt like I could lose my sense of reason at any moment.

After my shower, I changed into loungewear as well. I'm a tall guy, so it was always a little annoying when I wore one-size-fits-all clothing and it would always be a little too short, but I didn't think I needed to worry about that now. It wasn't like I was going outside. Besides, I wasn't going to be wearing it for very long.

"...Orihara-san."

The two of us sat down side by side on the bed and looked at each other. Orihara-san looked terribly nervous as she blushed and faced down. I probably looked the same way, and my heart was beating really fast. I ran my fingers over the bedsheets and nervously reached out my hand. Our hands touched, and as I felt her body's warmth, we intertwined our fingers. We had held hands so many times that I'd thought we were used to it by now, but it felt like we had gone back to when we had just first started doing it. It was unbelievable how hot our bodies became from just our hands and our skin touching.

"Um... Are you sure you want to do this?" I said, unable to keep myself from

putting my anxiety into words. I seriously regretted it as soon as I said it. It was so lame and embarrassing. *Asking for confirmation at this point is such a virgin thing to do.*

I hated myself for ruining the mood, but Orihara-san said, “Yes, it’s fine.” She nodded gently and didn’t look like she was offended. Then she laughed a little self-mockingly and said, “I’m sorry I made you wait so long. If I hadn’t gotten cold feet at the last second, we would have gone all the way the first time you stayed over at my house...”

“No, I don’t care about that.”

“But it’s okay now,” Orihara-san said, sounding a little shy but determined.



“If it’s with you, Momota-kun, I’m okay. I w-want to go all the way.”

“Orihara-san...”

“...Um, first, I want to apologize. If I’m not very good, I’m sorry. I’ve also...kind of been preparing because it’s my first time.”

“That’s my line... I’ll do my very best, but I’m sorry if I’m no good...”

“O-Okay...”

“...” We gradually ran out of things to say and sat there for a few seconds in silence with only our gazes intertwined. Then we brought our lips together...gently at first, gradually becoming more insatiable. I leaned in closer, placed my hand on her back, and embraced her. My girlfriend was twelve years older than me, but as I embraced her like this, she was so small she easily fit in my arms. I couldn’t help but love her. Then, I ever so gently pushed her down on the bed.

“M-Momota-kun...” As Orihara-san lay there on the bed, she looked up at me with moist, anxious eyes. However, she didn’t look afraid. Rather, it was like she was looking forward to it. The woman I love was lying down and waiting for me to make a move, and the exciting feeling of conquest threatened to melt my brain.

I was tempted to just give in to my instincts and make love to her, but what little reason I had left was desperately looking for the right opportunity and the right timing to put one of *those* on; according to the great teachings of my predecessors, taking time to wrap it up will just kill the mood, so a man has to put it on smoothly while keeping a good mood going.

I’ve got this. I’ve practiced plenty of times at home. After I’ve had a little more fun, I’ll reach naturally for what’s by the pillow, and—

“Huh?”

I couldn’t help but let out a weird voice, and the arousal that was trying to eat away at my senses disappeared as if it had been showered with cold water.

Gone... They’re gone!

The thing that a love hotel always has prepared, the contraceptives, weren’t

there. Next to the pillow was the heart-shaped plate that they were clearly supposed to be placed in, but those essential items weren't there. The only thing that was there was a rectangular piece of paper that was probably for the sake of presentation, but the most important things were missing.

"M-Momota-kun, what's wrong?" Orihara-san asked, probably because I was so shaken up that it was showing in my attitude.

"Um, well... Th-There aren't any condoms," I said, not knowing any way around it except to just explain the situation.

"Huh? No way..." Orihara-san got up with a surprised look and checked by the pillow. "Y-You're right."

"..." Ah, damn it. What the hell is this? Why did an accident have to happen at the critical moment? I should have made sure they were there in the beginning. I feel like they were there when I glanced over there before, but...I guess I just mistook that piece of paper for condoms.

"I-I wonder why? Did the hotel staff forget them?"

"...I don't know." This sucks. The mood's already dead. Since I was called out so suddenly, I didn't bring any condoms with me. I mean, I had no idea that things would turn out this way.

"...O-Orihara-san, do you have any?" I said, feeling like I'd die from shame. As a man, I felt so pathetic still trying to get the ball rolling even though I'd failed to make the bare minimum preparations.

"Sorry. I didn't bring any either..." Orihara-san said apologetically.

"I see..."

What am I going to do? What should I do? There's no way I could do something as irresponsible as doing it without a condom. However, getting condoms now would just be super awkward. Should I hurry and go buy some? Or maybe call the hotel staff and have them bring some? Either way...it would definitely deflate the atmosphere. This is supposed to be our first time, that special once in a life moment for the both of us. Yet things are such a mess because of my ineptitude...

“...Momota-kun.” As I was tormented by my feelings of shame and became hopelessly depressed, Orihara-san said something to me that I’d never expected. “It’s okay if you don’t wear one...”

For a moment, I had no idea what I was hearing. *“I don’t have to?” What that... What that means is...*

Perhaps it showed on my face how dumbstruck I was, because Orihara-san repeated herself and said, “It’s all right...if you don’t wear one. We can’t help it if there aren’t any...”

“But then...”

“I-It’s probably okay. I don’t think I’ll get pregnant that easily, and...today is probably a safe day for me,” she said with a forced smile. “Besides, on the off chance I do get pregnant, I’ll be fine.” She continued to pile on words like she was coming up with excuses.

“...”

“H-Ha ha ha. If I were a high school student, there would probably be an uproar if I got pregnant, but...I’m already twenty-seven, you know? I’m at the age where it totally wouldn’t be a problem if I had a child. I mean, a lot of my old classmates are having kids...” Orihara-san gradually started to speak faster. “I-I’ve got a lot of money saved up, so I’d be fine on my own for a while! I wouldn’t ask you to quit high school and get a job! Also, my company offers maternity and childcare leave.”

“...”

“Um, so...I-I’ll be all right! I won’t get pregnant that easily.”

“...Orihara-san.”

Maybe it would have been better if I hadn’t noticed. Perhaps it would have been better if I had taken her words at face value and given myself over to my growing carnal desires. She was asking me to be intimate with her without any protection, and maybe it would have been fine if I had indulged in that sheer pleasure without hesitation.

However, I realized what was going on. The tiny bit of my senses that

remained allowed me to see it. I couldn't help but notice her uncharacteristically irresponsible comments and impatient attitude. *I have to say something.*

"Orihara-san...did you, by any chance, hide the condoms?" As I said this, Orihara-san's body twitched in surprise. "So, I was right."

"U-Um..." Orihara-san's gaze swam for a few seconds, but soon, as if she had given up, she asked, "How could you tell?" and admitted her crime.

"It was clear as day. I mean, the way you're speaking totally isn't like you, Orihara-san... Besides, you didn't seem too panicked or surprised when you found out that there were no condoms."

"..."

"Also, I definitely made sure that there were condoms there."

I thought that I mistook the paper inside of the heart-shaped plate for them, but...there was definitely something off. I only caught a glimpse of them, but I made sure to check. I think the chances of me being wrong are slim. The contraceptives were definitely there when I checked, and I believe that was when Orihara-san was taking a shower, which means...

"Did you hide them while I was in the shower?"

"...Yes. I'm sorry," Orihara-san said in a depressed voice as she lowered head.

"Why did you do this?" I asked her, but the truth was I knew. I had already realized what she was trying to do...

"I thought I should get pregnant..." Orihara-san said, seeming like she could cry at any moment while her voice shook. "I thought that you wouldn't wear a condom today, we'd do that sort of thing...and if I got pregnant...people would have to accept our relationship."

Hmm, so that really was what was going on. It appears my instincts were correct, and this answers all my questions. "Why did Orihara-san take me to a love hotel?" and "Why was Orihara-san trying to take our relationship to the next level at a time when we should be coming up with a solution for Kiseki-san finding out about our relationship?" are both questions with a very simple

answer.

“You mean...you wanted to have a child with me?”

“Yes... That’s right...” Orihara-san nodded as if she was in pain. The expression on her face was filled with guilt and shame, and it hurt me just to look at her.

She wanted a child, and that’s why she hid the condoms. Her going ahead and taking a shower first was probably a part of her plan too... She got in first so she could hide the condoms while I showered. If she had let me take a shower first, I might have realized there weren’t any condoms and called the hotel for some. And she knew if I showered after her, when I got out, I’d...just kind of get in the mood. And, in fact, I didn’t realize about the condoms until the last second.

If we’d gone a little further... If we’d gotten much more excited... If we had totally lost all sense of reason... I probably would have given into my carnal desires and indulged in pleasure, completely unhindered. I was really at the end of my rope, in more ways than one.

“Our relationship...really is something that people would frown upon,” Orihara-san said like she was speaking to herself. “Lately, I’ve been a little bit carried away, but my sister’s reaction made me face reality again. I probably misread the situation somewhere along the way because your friends and Kaede-san were so kind...”

“...”

“I feel like the way my sister reacted was normal. I think even my parents would be upset if they heard about us... Heck, my sister might be telling them about us right now and they could be furious.” Her shoulders trembled from anxiety and fear.

This entire time, Orihara-san has been shouldering the risks of dating a minor. Risks like the danger of losing her standing in society and the guilt and danger of causing trouble for me and my family.

“My family would definitely be against me dating you,” she continued. “However, if I were to get pregnant with your child, then that might change things. That’s what I thought...”

“...”

“I thought that maybe if I had a child, things would work out like with my sister...”

Orihara Kisaki was going to marry my father in a so-called “shotgun wedding.” Even though they’d just met in June of this year, they were already planning on living together starting next month. Overall, things were proceeding quickly without a hitch. Without a doubt, one of the reasons for that was the pregnancy. Having a child changes things and leaves few options aside from marriage. That was how my sister saw things, for example. It didn’t seem like she was against Kisaki-san and my father getting married to begin with, but once she found out about the pregnancy, it seemed like she’d become more supportive of them. She told me that she was going to prioritize the health of the mother and the child to be born.

What if...What if Orihara-san were to become pregnant with my child?

To be honest, I have no idea what would happen. I’ve never thought about becoming a father at this age. If something like that were to happen, I’m sure we would be frowned upon from all sides. There’s a high possibility that Orihara-san and I would be scorned by both our relatives and society. However, while we’d be bashed from all angles...maybe they’d also lessen their efforts to pull us apart. They’d probably just have to accept it if we had a child.

Of course, I know what would really happen. Still, if we’re just talking about the probability of staying together from now on, then it might be a little bit higher if Orihara-san were pregnant. They say that children are a bond between parents, so if we had a child, it would tie us together. That’s why Orihara-san was clinging to that possibility; that’s why she brought me to this hotel like she was grasping at straws.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, Momota-kun,” Orihara-san said as she fought back tears. “I know what I’m doing is wrong... But I don’t know what else to do.”

“...”

“If not only my sister, but also my parents got involved, it would definitely be a big deal, and...I don’t know what’s going to happen now. When I think about how we might not be able to stay together or how I might not be able to be your girlfriend anymore, I...I...”

“Orihara-san...”

“W-Waah!” After looking like she was holding back tears this whole time, it seemed like Orihara-san finally couldn’t do it any longer and started to cry loudly. “Waah! I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna! I don’t wanna break up with you, Momota-kun!” The way she whined and cried out was just like a child. “Sob... But why, though? Why is it wrong? I just...want to be with you forever, Momota-kun! I’m not doing anything bad! Waah!”

Orihara-san wailed and wailed. It was like all of the anxiety and fear she had built up deep inside of her heart was spilling out as her tears and her voice.

I see. It looks like I’ve been underestimating Orihara-san. After about four months of dating, I thought I knew her pretty well, but it looks like that was just me being full of myself. I’m ashamed of myself for mistakenly thinking that the reason she brought me to this hotel was to make one last memory. It was the complete opposite; Orihara-san brought me here to make sure this wouldn’t be our last memory. Even if it took pulling out all the stops, she was doing it to not lose me. To her, being together with me means everything. The only thing she was seriously, earnestly thinking about was a future together with me.

If I’m being honest, the way she went about this wasn’t great. In a way, she was trying to deceive me. She ignored my feelings, tried to have a baby, and attempted to keep our relationship together by force. For her to think that way as an adult is perhaps overly irresponsible. It’s, perhaps, a very one-sided and selfish way of thinking. And to me, the way she tried to selfishly push her selfish reasons on me is just...irresistibly adorable.

I hugged Orihara-san tightly as she cried. I wrapped my hands around her in a strong embrace, like I would never let her go again.

“M-Momota-kun...”

“I’m sorry, Orihara-san. I’m very happy you feel that way. Thank you for thinking about being together with me more than anything else. Thank you. However, right now, having a child isn’t an option for me.”

“...”

“Even if you are a working adult, I can’t do something as irresponsible as force

that burden onto just you, Orihara-san. Right now...I don't have the determination or the money to raise a child." *I'm different from my dad, who would be accepted even if he had a shotgun wedding. He has money and is able to fulfill his duties as an adult. I'm nothing like him.* "After all, I'm still just a kid in high school..."

"...Yes, I know. I'm so, so sorry for trying to do something so strange... You didn't do anything wrong, Momota-kun..."

"You didn't do anything wrong either, Orihara-san. This is just what happened because you were thinking seriously about me."

"Momota-kun..."

"In the end, I'm a fifteen-year-old high school student. No matter how much I try to pretend to be an adult, that fact won't change."

"..."

"Still, after my birthday this month, I'll be sixteen."

"Huh..."

"After two years, I'll be eighteen."

No matter how much I may try, I won't suddenly become an adult. However, one day I will grow up and gradually become an adult. I won't just become an adult naturally, though; I have to become one by my own will and determination.

"And when I turn eighteen, Orihara-san, please marry me."

Orihara-san was shocked at first, almost as if she had no idea what my words meant.

"What...?"

"I want to be with you for the rest of my life too. No matter what obstacles or hardships we may face, I want to overcome them together, Orihara-san."

"..."

"I can get married when I turn eighteen. However, even then I think I'll still be just a kid who isn't ready to be independent. I'll still be a high schooler,

and...even after I graduate, I want to go to a vocational school. I won't be able to make money on my own right away..." *I can't say anything outrageous like, "I'll make her happy" that a grown man would. Right now, and probably even after I turn eighteen, that would be impossible.* "There's no way I can make you happy all by myself, Orihara-san. It's pathetic, but that's the truth. So I want to take on everything together."

"Together..."

"The two of us, together." I looked Orihara-san straight in the eye and said, "But I don't want to just elope or force our way through it all while everyone objects. Let's do our best to make everyone happy."

"Everyone?"

"Kisaki-san, your parents, my family, and...of course, us. Everyone will be happy."

What I'm saying is probably outlandishly idealistic and easier said than done. It's absurdly optimistic; forget one, it's like two pies in the sky. However, even so, I want to reach for that ideal. I want to fight against reality and make it mine.

"For the two years until I become eighteen, let's try our best to convince everyone. We'll do our best to persuade them, and when we get both our families' approval...let's get married."

"..."

"As for kids... Well, I think there's a proper order for that type of thing, after all. Let's get married first, and then we can think about it gradually..."

"Waah!" Orihara-san had been listening to me with a dumbfounded expression on her face, but then she started crying again. She hid her face with her hands, and I couldn't see her expression anymore.

"O-Orihara-san..."

"N-No... I'm fine... It's just... I'm just so happy," she said. She slightly lowered her hands, so I could see her face that was made a mess from her tears; she had a wonderfully happy smile. Even though tears were streaming down her face,

she was beaming. “How is it that you always, always say the thing that I want to hear the most, Momota-kun? I’m so happy, I’m crying...”

“It’s nothing. I didn’t say anything special.”

“But...are you sure you want me? I’m twelve years older than you, you know?” Orihara-san said after she wiped her tears with her hand.

“Actually, it’s eleven years and ten months, isn’t it?” I joked with her a little. Orihara-san paused for a moment and then burst out laughing.

“Ha ha ha. You stole my line.”

“What about you, Orihara-san? Are you sure you want me? I said a lot of things to try to sound cool just now, but when I turn eighteen, I’m going to be a student with no income. Are you really sure you want someone like that as your husband?”

“I do,” Orihara-san said quickly, with barely a pause. Then, without hesitation, she brought her body close to mine and wrapped her hands around my back, embracing me with her whole body against mine. “I want to be with you, Momota-kun, and nobody else. Even if you are a boy who’s twelve years younger than me... I want to get married and be with you forever, Momota-kun.”

“Orihara-san.” The words she whispered into my ear resonated with what I felt in my heart.

“...It’s only a slight one,” I said. “Our age gap will never be closed. However, if we cherish one another, those twelve years will only be a slight gap.”

Our age difference will never go away no matter what we do; erasing it is impossible. However, how we feel about it is up to us. If we stand firm, even if other people say things about us like “That’s not ‘slight’ at all,” we can make it be “slight.” After all, Orihara-san is my super cute, slightly older girlfriend.

“‘A slight gap,’ huh? You really are amazing, Momota-kun. You’re way younger than me, but I feel like you’re way more mature and more focused on the future than I am.”

“That’s not true. I’m not focused on the future at all. It’s all wishful thinking,

and the future I'm looking at is really naive, I think. But..."

"But...?"

"I think that even if it's naive, if the two of us can see it together, then it will become closer to reality. Not alone, but the two of us, together..."

There's only so much I can do by myself. No matter how tough I try to be, there's a limit to what I can do. However, if the two of us are facing the same direction together, then I feel like we can see a better future than if one of us were looking off somewhere on our own.

"You really are amazing, Momota-kun..." Orihara-san once again hugged me tightly. "I like what you just said."

"What I just said?"

"What you said about working hard to make everyone happy."

Everyone. Orihara-san's family, my family, and, more than anyone, us.

"I think that's really nice. Surely, everyone becoming happy is what's best."

"Well, it's a really idealistic thought."

"It's fine if it's idealistic. It'll probably be the hardest path to take, but I think it's the best one. It will probably be way more difficult than if we broke up, though..."

"You're right."

"But even if it is difficult, I prefer it that way. If I can walk that path together with you, that's the path I prefer, no matter how hard it is."

After holding each other this whole time, we slightly pulled our bodies apart and gazed at each other. Orihara-san was smiling very happily, and I probably had a similar look on my face. The situation hadn't changed, but just knowing that we were going in the same direction together somehow filled me with a tremendous sense of happiness and invincibility.

"Let's do our best to make everyone happy, Orihara-san."

"Yes, let's do it. Also..."

"Also..."

“L-Let’s get married.”

“...Yes.”

“Ha ha ha.”

“...I’m sorry that my proposal was in a love hotel while we’re half-naked.”

“N-No, don’t worry about that! It made me really happy!”

“One day, when I’m eighteen, I’m going to do it again. I’ll do a proper, serious proposal.”

“S-Serious proposal? O-Okay... I-I’m looking forward to it.”

We both smiled at each other, as it seemed that the only thing that filled our hearts was happiness.

So...yeah... A lot of things just got settled. Anyway...

“O-Orihara-san.” At the end of our various struggles, I hesitated a bit, but I didn’t have any other choice. I still had unfinished business. “Well...things have been settled, huh?”

“What?”

“I mean, like, now that we’ve decided our future plans, things have been settled.”



“...Y-Yeah, that’s right.” Orihara-san looked puzzled, as it seemed like my feelings weren’t reaching her at all. It was like the mood was completely over. However, I couldn’t let it end like this.

“Um, so...” I really didn’t want to say it with this kind of atmosphere but, nevertheless, I couldn’t not say it. “I-Is it alright if we keep going?”

“K-Keep going?!” It looked like Orihara-san finally understood what I was trying to say. She remembered where we were and what we had come here to do after being enveloped in the warm atmosphere of our pure love made her forget.

“I-I can’t responsibly approve of your no-holds-barred approach... However! Be that as it may! If we were to use protection, I thought I’d like to continue...”

“H-Huh... Oh, ha ha ha. I-I see. That’s right. All I did was hide the condoms, but there’s still that...” Orihara-san got an awkward and embarrassed look on her face as her gaze shifted around. “You...want to do it, huh?”

“...Yes, a lot.”

“Y-Yeah, you do. I mean...you’ve been really *energetic* this whole time. Even when you proposed to me...”

“No, that was, um...” I’d have preferred if she didn’t touch on that. It was really embarrassing, so I wish she didn’t mention it at all. The truth is that, just now, during our serious talk, I was “really energetic” the whole time. It was so embarrassing I could die.

“Umm... Okay, then. Let’s do it,” Orihara-san said with a really cute expression after some hesitation. “Just hold on... Let me go get them.”

She headed to her bag, which she had put on the room’s sofa. Apparently that was where she had hid the condoms. She opened the bag’s zipper...and her expression froze. “Oh...”

“Wh-What is it?” I asked, and she pulled her smartphone out of her bag.

“My sister has been trying to call me this whole time...” Orihara-san showed me the screen of her smartphone. In the upper right-hand part of the icon, it showed the number thirty-two. “What should I do? I totally didn’t realize it...”

Wow, she's calling again." It seemed that right at that moment, another phone call was coming from Kisaki-san. With a surprised look, Orihara-san quickly answered the phone.

"Hime-chan?! Where are you?!" Kisaki-san's tearful yelling was so loud that I could hear it from over where I was.

"O-Onee-chan..."

"Why didn't you pick up the phone?! Do you have any idea how much I was worried?! I called you so many times!"

"I-I'm sorry... I totally didn't realize you were calling."

"Seriously, do you have any idea how much I was worried?! The way you left after our fight... The way you didn't pick up no matter how much I called you... I was really, really worried about whether I had done something rash! But I'm glad you're okay! Waah! I was really worried, you know?"

"...I-I'm sorry."

"Sob... I'm sorry for getting so emotional before."

"No, I'm sorry for getting emotional too..."

"I'm sorry for telling you to get out, even though it was your apartment."

"Yeah, that was really..."

"I...haven't told mom and dad anything yet."

"What?"

"Let's really sit down and talk about it again. Please hurry and come home. It's already late."

"Um... O-Okay." The phone call ended there, and Orihara-san looked at me with a troubled look in her eyes. When faced with that kind of look, there was only one thing I could say.

"...Shall we go?" I said, swallowing a lot of different feelings.

≡

"Onee-chan!" When we arrived at Orihara-san's apartment and opened the

door to the entranceway, Kisasi-san, who had apparently been waiting there the entire time, suddenly came and hugged Orihara-san. “H-Hey, Onee-chan...”

“Hime-chan, you big dummy! I was so worried!”

“I-I said I’m sorry...”

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re okay. Hurry and come inside—” Kisasi-san got as far as saying that when she finally realized I was there too. Her eyes went wide with surprise, and she said, “...I see. So you were with Momota-kun this whole time...” She quickly gained an expression that looked like she understood what was going on, and she seemed exasperated.

“I should have guessed,” she continued. “The person that you’d turn to right now if you were in trouble wouldn’t be our parents or me, but Momota-kun. You two sure are close.” Her voice sounded somewhat bitter, like she was making fun of us. “Seriously, what are you doing running around with a minor this late at night?”

“We were...”

“I-It’s okay, I have a really loose curfew,” I said, stepping in for Orihara-san who was at a loss for words.

“Th-That’s not the issue here!” Kisasi-san said firmly. She then let out a deep breath. “I’m just... I’m tired of trying to convince you guys. No matter how politely I make a sound argument, you two have no intention of listening to me.” For us, her dismissive words were a sign of hope, and Orihara-san raised her head and took a step forward.

“Onee-chan, you approve of us...?”

“Don’t get me wrong. There’s no way I’d do that,” Kisasi-san said sharply. With a stern look, she glared at us and said, “There’s no way I’d forgive having a relationship with a minor... Besides, to me, it looks like you two just have your heads in the clouds and are getting carried away from having your first boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“...”

“However, I’m going to stop trying to use forceful measures to get you to

break up, and I'm going to try talking it over with you. Also, I won't tell mom and dad about this for a while. First, let's really discuss it and find an answer ourselves. Is that okay?"

"...Yes, that's good enough for now. Thank you, Onee-chan," Orihara-san said and bowed. I also deeply lowered my head and bowed with her.

"It's already late, so hurry up and go home, Momota-kun."

"Yes, I will."

"Also... I'll see you this weekend."

"Oh... Yes. I'll see you then."

"I think you already understand, but... Don't compare my cooking to Hime-chan's, okay? I mean, I say compare, but I'll be making exactly what Hime-chan taught me today. She told me earlier that you know all the secret ingredients and stuff, so..."

"I-I understand. I'll act like it's my first time eating it."

"...Please do. This is the first time I'm serving Shigeru-san a home-cooked meal, so... I'm really counting on you."

She's being serious about counting on me. Hmm... this really is a strange relationship we have. I've been thinking about her like a wall standing in front of us, but here she is asking for my help with her and my father's future.

This truly is a delicate position; I don't know if she's an enemy or a friend. However, this might just be the way the world is. There aren't a lot of obvious villains. The majority of those around you are just normal people who become your ally or your enemy depending on the time or situation. It depends on how you feel whether they appear good or evil. It's like they say, "There is kindness to be found everywhere."

The types of people that Orihara-san and I will probably have to contend with from here on out aren't going to be monsters. They'll be normal people who are neither bad nor good, and we'll have to sincerely persuade them as we face them. That path will probably be far more difficult than just defeating some obvious enemy. Still, with the two of us together, I feel like it'll be okay.

“Well, good night.” We exchanged goodbyes and parted ways at the entrance to the apartment. After taking a few steps, I turned around. Though Kisasi-san had already gone inside, Orihara-san was still outside. Though half of her body was hidden, she was facing toward me. Apparently, she’d looked back with the same timing that I did.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

We looked at each other without saying anything and gave each other a little wave. That’s all it took to make me feel like we were connected in some way. Even a small little miracle like this felt like destiny, and the fact that it felt like destiny was the happiest feeling in the world.

≡Chapter 4: Thumbelina Is Also Doing Her Best

Our school was gradually starting to be influenced by the school festival, and I do mean gradually. While there was only a month until the school festival, on the same token, there were over three weeks left. Even though there was an increase in things to talk about among the students, there were only a few motivated classes who actually started their preparations.

Supposedly, at our school it was usually the second-years who took the festival seriously. Third-years were preoccupied with studies for entrance exams, and there were still a lot of things that the first-years didn't understand, so they had a tendency to not be very enthusiastic about the whole thing, it seemed. Be that as it may, there were still first-year and third-year classes who were doing their best to enjoy the school festival.

For better or worse, my class was more on the disinterested side. We were somewhat lacking in enthusiasm, and we had a very meh attitude about how much work we'd do and how much fun we'd have at the festival.

Among this year's first years, the only class that had been enthusiastic and started preparing was...

"Hey, Momota." It was after school, and as I was walking down the hall preparing to go home, Ibusuki called out to me. "Have you seen Urano anywhere?"

"Ura? No, I haven't."

"Really? Seriously, where did he run off to? I even made sure to tell him to stay after school today..." Ibusuki said, crossing her arms and pouting her lips in discontent.

"It couldn't be... Is he skipping out on preparing for the festival?" *It looks like their class has already started preparing their attraction for the school festival. As the class representative, Ura should be the first one to act. Since I heard that he diligently attended the class representative meeting with Kana yesterday, I*

totally thought he was trying hard in his own way, but...

“Huh? No, he isn’t skipping out,” Ibusuki said, responding to my concern by shaking her head. Then, very normally, she said, “In fact, Urano is working really hard.”

“I-Is he really?”

“Our class’s attraction is a maid cafe, and Urano quickly found a place where we can rent maid outfits from. Right now, we’re looking at the sizes and types of outfits and discussing where we should put them.”

“Is that right?”

“He was saying, ‘Don’t go with any outfits with unnaturally short skirts because they’d just attract attention from teachers and the student council, plus it’s just indecent.’ So right now, we’re considering going the authentic route with the costumes.”

“I see.” That’s just like him. He’ll say, “I’m not that kind of otaku. I don’t have a thing for maids,” but he’s still way more knowledgeable about them than a lightweight otaku like myself. He probably has his own preferred aesthetics when it comes to maid outfits too.

“Also, he’s really picky with his criticism. I wanted to make real coffee from grinding beans for our cafe.”

“Yeah?”

“But Urano was all like, ‘There’s no way an amateur who doesn’t do it regularly can make good coffee from grinding beans. Don’t underestimate how difficult it is to make coffee,’ and got on me about it.”

“Oh...”

Are they going to go with a Dolce Gusto? That would be the fastest way to make it. I’ve used the one at Orihara-san’s house a bunch of times, and it really is convenient. I asked my dad to buy it for our house right away. With it, anyone can easily enjoy a delicious cup of coffee. It’s perfect for students running a cafe at a school festival. Making authentic coffee from grinding beans takes time for each cup, so if students who weren’t used to making it tried to do it, who knows

how much time it would take...

Using a coffee maker would be the correct choice. Well, for an attraction that's using coffee as a selling point, it does kind of feel like they're cutting corners, but if it's a maid cafe it'll probably be okay.

"Wow, Ura's really working hard on this."

"Yeah, I was surprised too. Well, I expected Urano to complain while he helped out, but he's working more than I expected. Looks like I was right to nominate him," Ibusuki said happily and with pride like it was her own work.

Hmm. Kana thinks that Ibusuki likes Ura, but I wonder what kind of like this is? Right now, she's straight-up praising Ura with a pleasant, carefree smile on her face. I think that if she really had a thing for him, it wouldn't be unusual if she looked a little shy or embarrassed. It doesn't seem like she totally likes him as a friend, though.

"...Wait, huh?" I came back to my senses after being lost in thought. "You said that Urano isn't skipping out and he's properly doing his job, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then why are you looking for him?"

"Oh, today I had something else for him aside from the festival preparations."

"Something else?"

"I thought I'd get him some more friends," Ibusuki said with a big smile on her face like it was a brilliant idea. "It's great that Urano is working so hard and everything, but he doesn't talk to anyone aside from me. Whenever he has an idea or some criticism, he goes through me. Even though he's so bossy with me, whenever another person enters the conversation, he gets all nervous."

"..."

"So, I thought I'd give him a hand and help him adjust to our class."

"...And exactly what do you plan on doing?"

"I thought that I'd have him introduce himself and have a small chat with the whole class."

“Are you trying to kill him?!” I couldn’t help yelling. It just slipped out. “I-Ibusuki, what are you thinking? That’s like some new style of torture... Are you trying to ruin him for life?”

“What? It’s a good idea, though.” Ibusuki said begrudgingly.

It’s like she has no idea just how horrific her plan is.

“Urano doesn’t stand out in the class, so no one has any idea what kind of guy he is. It’d be normal for him to introduce himself first, wouldn’t it?”

“I mean, yeah, that’s true, but...”

She probably is doing this with purely good intentions without an ounce of ill will. That’s why it’s so bad, though. If I were forced to introduce myself in front of my entire class, it would crush my soul. For someone like Ura, whose mental fortitude is about as tough as tofu, it would be like having his soul crushed into nonexistence by some kind of gravity-based special move.

I totally get why he escaped home today. It wasn’t because it was troublesome or annoying; he sensed an instinctive danger and ran away at full speed.

“Ibusuki... In this world there’s some people who would find that kind of thing fatal. Ura is a prime example of that, so if you want him to overcome being bad at communicating with others, you have to be much more careful with him... imagine you’re disarming a bomb on top of thin ice.”

“You’re too nice, Momota.”

If my girlfriend had told me those words, it probably would have traumatized me for the rest of my life, but since it’s just my friend who’s a girl, I didn’t suffer too much damage.

“Isn’t he always like that because you guys spoil him? It’s like you’re the only friends he has, and he only wants to hang out with you.”

“...”

“It’s probably time for him to stop being so dependent on you guys.”

“That’s...”

I kind of didn't know what to say. *I wonder if she has a point. I thought that an outgoing girl who's a popular member of her class like Ibusuki was thoughtlessly forcing her values onto an introvert like Ura, but it looks like she really had a plan. There's no doubt that her good intentions were pushy, but they were good and filled with compassion and kindness.*

"If Urano himself really likes being by himself and doesn't want to get involved with anyone, then I think that that's fine. But he does seem to enjoy himself when he's with other people, doesn't he? Even though he was always complaining, he seemed like he really had a good time when we went camping during summer break."

"..."

"That's why I nominated him to be our class representative for the school festival, and... yeah, I made the right choice. Who would have thought he'd be so proactive and work this hard?"

"...You're right." I had an indescribable feeling. I knew that Ura, who was an introvert among introverts and a self-proclaimed loner, was actually lonely and longing for companionship. And it's just like Ibusuki said, he did have a pretty good time when we went camping, I think. However, perhaps the reason that Ura was working so uncharacteristically hard for the school festival was because...

"Huh? Wh-Why are you staring at me?"

"...It's nothing." Ibusuki looked surprised, but I couldn't say anything to her. *Well, there's probably no point in pursuing it any further anyway. It's all just a guess, and even if it were correct, there's no reason to read too much into it without being asked to by the person in question. I mean, right now I'm in no position to be butting into anyone else's love life.*

"Well, I understand where you're coming from, Ibusuki. Just let him off the hook with that public execution by self-introduction stuff, okay? It probably won't work out the way you intend it to, and if you mess up it'll cause some serious damage to Ura."

"Hmm. Yeah, you're right. I was taking some drastic measures."

Looks like she was aware of what she was doing.

“Anyway, please take it easy on Ura and make it a fun school festival, okay?”

“Yeah, of course. But why are you acting like you’re not involved? You need to enjoy yourself too, Momota.”

“My class isn’t really that motivated. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“...To be honest, I have more important things to worry about,” I complained, and Ibusuki got a look on her face like she guessed what was going on.

“More important things... Are you talking about Orihara-san?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“No way. Did something happen? Oh no... Did you guys break up or something?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. You see...”

Presently, we changed locations to a less populated area, the landing of a flight of stairs.

After hearing my story, Ibusuki had a really difficult expression on her face. “Orihara-san’s older sister becoming your step-mom is a pretty big twist. A breakup story would have been easier to understand than that...”

“...You’ve got that right.” I had to agree with her. I was living quite the rare life, and it was hard to guess what’s going to come next.

“So, it’s pretty much decided that your dad and Orihara-san’s sister are going to get married and that you’re going to have a little brother or sister?”

“Yeah.”

“Also... Orihara-san’s sister is opposed to your and Orihara-san’s relationship?”

“Yep.”

“Th-That’s quite the problem,” Ibusuki said, sounding truly puzzled.

“You’re telling me. Seriously I don’t know what to do,” I said back to her with

a sigh.

Ibusuki looked at me suspiciously. “Hmm? Despite what you’re saying...you seem pretty casual about it.”

“Huh?”

“It’s like you’re troubled, but you’re not depressed about it.”

“Oh... Well, that’s probably true. I’m in trouble, but I know what I want to do.” *It’s like, I’m facing difficulties, but I’m not at a loss about them, and I know what I have to do. Also, I can only see the path that I have to take. The other day, we made our decision at that love hotel...although, if it were possible, I would have liked to have made that decision at a place that wasn’t a love hotel.*

“I don’t have the option of breaking up with Orihara-san. No matter who’s opposed to us, all we can do is try to persuade them somehow.”

“...” Ibusuki looked taken aback. “I-It’s like...you’re so straightforward about it I’m getting embarrassed just from listening to you, Momota.”

“...Shut up.”

“Ha ha ha. Well, I don’t feel like making fun of you when you speak so straightforwardly like that.” Ibusuki then nodded like she was satisfied with something. “You really are the man who’s loved Orihara-san a million times.”

The man who’s loved a million times? I’ve heard of the cat who’s lived a million times, but not this.

“Did you forget? You know, at the amusement park when we...w-went on a date,” Ibusuki said awkwardly. “In the Ferris wheel, you said, ‘Even if I could redo my life a million times, I’d want to fall in love with Orihara-san,’ right?”

“Yeah.” *I did say that. We were inside of the Ferris wheel where we had a view of the sunset. I had refused Ibusuki’s confession for the second time, and when she asked me what I would have done if she had confessed to me before I met Orihara-san, that was how I’d answered her.*

“I don’t know what the past me would have chosen. Myself right now, however... Even if I could redo my life a million times, I’d want to fall in love with Orihara-san.”

When I think back on it, I feel like I said some pretty embarrassing things. However, it's how I really felt, and even now that feeling hasn't changed. Life is a series of choices, or maybe you could say that the series of choices you make is your life. Real life isn't like a game. There are no save points, there are no second go-throughs, and your choices can't be redone. That's why choices are precious. Even if I could go back and redo the past, I'd still choose Orihara-san. No matter how many times I could redo my life, this one choice now is the one I want to cherish. That's what I feel from the bottom of my heart. However, it could be...

"...It might not be good enough to just choose," I said, and Ibusuki tilted her head.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"No, I'm just talking to myself," I said and shook my head slightly, and Ibusuki gave me a strange look.

"Well, that's fine. I think it's for the best if you two don't break up," she said, taking us back on topic. "It doesn't look like I can do anything, but...I'm rooting for you guys in my heart."

"That's more than enough."

"It'd be nice if somehow things get solved and Orihara-san could come to the school festival next month."

"...I don't think that's a good idea. If Orihara-san came here, then our relationship would be..."

"Really? It's fine if you guys don't act like a couple, right? You should just say you brought along an acquaintance. Our school festival by and large allows outside attendance."

"...You're probably right." *In a way, I had overlooked that part. I had just decided it would be suicide to bring Orihara-san to a school event and hadn't even thought about inviting her in the first place. However, if I were to just act like, "She's an acquaintance, so what?" it might be okay.*

"How about you just say she's a relative? Wait... If your dad and her sister are going to get married, then doesn't that mean you two will be relatives?"

“What?!” That’s something else I overlooked... I had so many other things on my mind that I didn’t realize it, but... That’s right. If my dad and Kisaki-san get married, then that means...

“Orihara-san and I are going to be relatives?”

“There you go. Now she can come to the school festival no problem. I mean, you guys really are relatives, and there’s nothing unnatural about relatives doing stuff together,” Ibusuki said like she had come up with a great idea.

I’m not that optimistic, but I do think I could learn a little from her positive thinking.

Up until now, whenever Orihara-san and I have met up in public, we’ve always agreed to pretend we’re related if we ran into someone we knew. Who would have thought that we’re actually going to become relatives? Talk about truth coming from a lie. If I think really positively about it, then that means that we’ll be able to date even more openly from now on. It wouldn’t be a lie since we’re really relatives now.

“If Orihara-san is able to make it, come hang out at our maid cafe. Right now, we’re thinking up a way of having it be where even our customers can change into maid outfits. You might be able to see Orihara-san in a maid outfit, you know?”

“Oh...” Orihara-san in a maid outfit, huh? That’s definitely got to have some tremendous destructive power. If Ura is going to be managing things, then it’ll probably be a maid uniform with a less flirtatious design. The area around the bust won’t be unnaturally exposed, and the skirt won’t be unnaturally short. It’ll be a very orthodox maid uniform with the modesty of a handmaid. However, in the case of Orihara-san, no matter how wholesomely or purely she’s dressed, some of her aggressive charm will probably overflow. Like her breasts, or her breasts. Or maybe even her breasts.

“Well, Urano is totally against it though, so it looks like it’s not going to happen. He said, ‘We can’t do that when we don’t even know what kinds of body types the customers will have. Just how many sizes are you planning on preparing?’ I do feel like he has a point...”

“...Oh, I see.”

“D-Don’t look so disappointed!” Ibusuki said with a disgusted expression.

It looks like Orihara-san in a maid outfit will only be a reality in my imagination...

≡Chapter 5: Princess Kisaki Comes to Stay the Night

It seemed that trouble wasn't just seeping into my life; it had slowly found its way into Orihara-san's as well. I received a call from her friend Shirai Yuki-san, and it sounded like she already heard most of the details about the situation. I thought she was calling me because she was worried, but for some reason, her attitude was pretty laid-back.

"You know, if you think about it, if your dad and Kisaki-san get married and you two become relatives...Hime will become your aunt."

"...Yes, you're right." Orihara-san and I had prepared "Operation: Pretend We're Relatives" in case we were seen by anyone we knew, and the plan was to say that Orihara-san was my auntie. Who would have thought that the lie would become the truth and she'd actually become my aunt?

Incidentally, there are two ways to write the kanji for "aunt," and it changes depending on whether they're the older or younger sibling of the parent in question. The way you write "uncle" is the same way. Since Orihara-san is the younger sister of my new stepmom, Kisaki-san, I would have to use the characters for "younger aunt" when referring to her in writing.

"Um... Can you please not say anything to Orihara-san about how she's actually becoming my aunt? She'll probably—no, she'll definitely get upset about it, I think."

"You're right. She got really upset when I told her about it."

"..." Looks like I'm too late and she's already made fun of her... "P-Please give her a break. Orihara-san takes those things seriously, after all."

"He he. I'm sorry. But, on the other hand, the fact that I was able to tease her means she was in a good enough mood to handle it," Yuki-san said jovially. "It seems like you and Hime have been through a lot, but you're doing better than I thought you'd be."

"We're getting by somehow."

“Also, I heard that you proposed to Hime and said you’d get married to her when you turn eighteen.”

“...You heard that too?”

“Something was clearly off when I was talking to her, so I thought I’d try baiting her into telling me about it. She spilled the beans right away.”

Darn it, Orihara-san... Well, she does fall for that kind of thing really easily. Plus, the one tricking her was Yuki-san, so she didn’t have a chance to begin with.

“He he he. So, Hime, of all people, is finally getting married... I’m looking forward to two years from now,” Yuki-san said jovially. She was teasing me, but I don’t think there was any nuance of her mocking me. She sounded like she was enjoying herself, pure and simple. “As her friend, I was a little worried, but it looks like I don’t have to get involved. Truth is...I called to warn you, in case you were going to do something rash.”

“Something rash?”

“Something like saying you’ll quit school and get a job.”

“...Oh.” *I did consider it a little bit. It’s a possibility I thought about for a little while and quickly dismissed.* “It’s not like I didn’t think about that option...but I decided not to do it. It would probably just lead to an ending where no one would be happy. I’m just a kid right now, so no matter how much I may try to act like an adult, I won’t just suddenly become one,” I said with a grimace.

“...You are an adult, Momota-kun,” Yuki-san told me in a quiet voice, even though I’d said I was just a kid.

“I’m an adult?”

“You realize that you’re just a kid who’s trying to grab onto something you can’t reach. I think you’re way more mature than some people who think that they’re already adults.”

“...”

“Trying to reach past your limits isn’t bad, but the most important thing is keeping your feet on the ground... I’m sure you understand what that means.”

She was being abstract about it, but I kind of understood what she was trying to say. If I was going to try to grab something out of my reach, I had to stay grounded.

“In any case, I’m glad it looks like I didn’t need to worry about anything. Jeez, I wonder if this is what they call excessive worrying. I really am getting old,” Yuki-san said, muttering to herself. “Take care of Hime, Momota-kun. She’s one of my few precious friends.”

“...I will,” I said and nodded firmly.

Before I knew it, the dreaded weekend had arrived: it was the day that my new mother would be coming to stay the night. In the evening, my dad drove out to bring over Kisaki-san, and then my sister, my father, Kisaki-san, and I had dinner together.

“...I don’t know if it’s to your tastes.”

“Wow, this is great, Kisaki-san! I had no idea you were such a good cook.”

“Oh no, you flatter me too much, Shigeru-san.” My dad and Kisaki-san spoke like they were a newly married couple. Lined up on the dinner table was ginger pork, fried eggplant soaked in broth, boiled spinach, and enough rice and miso soup for everyone. Apparently, Kisaki-san had said, “I want to go with something Japanese!” so Orihara-san had come up with this menu for her.

“It tastes great.”

“R-Really, Shigeru-san?”

“Yeah, it’s really good, Kisaki-san,” my sister said. “It tastes so good I wish I could eat it every day. We should start living together starting tomorrow.”

“Kaede-chan... Th-Thank you.” Kisaki-san smiled happily from my dad and sister’s praise. Then she turned to me and said, “How is it, Momota-kun?” She had a very kind smile on her face, but the same couldn’t be said for the look in her eyes. I thought I could hear her inner voice saying, “Please give a good reaction. Also, don’t compare it to Hime-chan’s cooking, okay?”

“It tastes very good. You sure are good at cooking, Kisaki-san.”

“Thank you, Momota-kun. Now, don’t be shy and eat up,” she said, and we both beamed at one another.

Our banter was flawless. By all accounts, this was probably the kind of conversation that a stepmother would have with her stepson the second time she met him. Well... I don’t really have any other examples to compare this to, but I felt like we managed to have a normal conversation. The last time we had eaten together was a disaster, but when we were both prepared, we could put on a performance of this caliber. I felt relieved...however, we were oblivious of our fatal mistake.

“‘M-Momota-kun’?” said my dad, puzzled. “Kisaki-san...why are you only calling Kaoru by his last name?” Kisaki-san’s and my face twitched simultaneously.

Crap! I totally forgot about how she calls me that! Up until now, Kisaki-san has only ever called me “Momota-kun,” so that’s what slipped out. But calling me that in front of my sister and dad is definitely weird! It looks like a weird situation where my new stepmom is only calling me, her new son, by his last name! It’s like she’s insulting me in some kind of roundabout way and I’m being singled out!

“U-Um... N-No, it’s not what you think, Shigeru-san! It’s just... I just thought I’d sound too familiar if I suddenly called a boy who’s at a difficult stage of puberty by his first name. Isn’t that right, Momo... Kaoru-kun?”

You’re asking me to agree that I’m having a hard time with puberty?! That’s what you want me to follow up on?!

“Th-That’s right. Yeah, I’m at such a difficult age, all right. I was really hoping that she’d call me by my last name once to ease me into it...” Even though I was supposedly at a difficult age, I was speaking like I was being considerate of her. I didn’t know what I should do, and my dad gave us a strange look as we panicked.

“Hey, Dad, do you want a second helping of rice?” my sister said as she stood up and held out her hand.

“No, I’m already full.”

“Come on, it’s her first home-cooked meal, so why not eat some more?”

“Oh. Y-Yeah, you’re right.” Convinced by my sister, my father ate the rest of the rice, and it seemed like the topic of conversation had been diverted nicely. Kisaki-san and I let out a sigh of relief, and on the inside, I profusely thanked my sister.

Despite a little trouble, dinner ended peacefully. Afterward, everyone moved to the living room, and we chatted. Kisaki-san pulled out a picture of the baby’s ultrasound, and we all looked at it together. At three months in, it was of course still small, but it seemed to be gradually taking on the shape of a person. You couldn’t see its limbs very well, but you could clearly see its head and torso. As we looked at Kisaki-san’s healthily growing unborn baby, we had fun talking about things like whether it would be a boy or a girl and what name we should give it.

It might have been a little different than that old saying that “children are the glue that keeps a family together,” but I thought it was nice how we could talk forever about the child. And so, we were able to spend the time after dinner together truly peacefully without any particular awkwardness.

After we had all bathed in turn, it was time for bed. The three of us would be sleeping in our rooms, and we had Kisaki-san sleep on a guest futon in the alcove on the first floor. Eventually, she’ll probably be sleeping in the same room as my father, but... Well, yeah. I don’t know how to say it, but them sleeping together the first time she stays over is... Yeah... I feel like I have to be considerate of them... I mean, I don’t know.

Earlier, there was talk like “What should we do for the next child?” and...if that happens, are they going to make it here? After my sister and I have fallen asleep, is Kisaki-san going to go all out again?

I don’t like it... I really don’t...

“Sigh...” It was past eleven at night, and after I got into bed, I deeply exhaled out of exhaustion and relief. I was mentally fatigued from a lot of things, but I was glad that tonight had ended without any problems. Kisaki-san had seemed a little nervous, but thankfully my sister took care of that with her strong conversational skills. It looked like she was serious about putting the mother

and child first.

Before I went to bed, I sent Orihara-san a text that said, “It ended without a hitch.” and she sent back a stamp of a tiny cartoon character that said “Thank goodness~” as it cried. We then texted each other “Good night,” and I placed my smartphone next to my pillow. I closed my eyes and I soon became sleepy.

As I dozed off, I didn’t realize that the sleepover I thought had gone off without a hitch wasn’t actually over. A field trip isn’t over until you return home, and a sleepover is still a sleepover until you leave the house in the morning. And what was going to happen at this sleepover was still yet to come.

≡

I had a dream. It was the type of dream where you realize it’s a dream *partway through*. The vague, unstable feeling I’d had, like I was floating in the air, told me that everything I was seeing was a dream. I mean, there was no way that something like this could happen in real life. The real Orihara-san would never do something like this.

“Hey, Momota-kun?” Orihara-san said in a seductive, purring voice. I was lying on the bed, and she was right next to me, her body on mine. As she intertwined her shapely legs with mine, she ran her slender fingers over my body. To top it all off, she had her ample breasts shamelessly pushed against me.

“How about we pick up where we left off the other day?” she whispered in a sweet voice. “Come on, please. I can’t take it anymore!” Her voice was ridiculously seductive. Her words were so sultry...

“...” Oh yeah, this is definitely a dream. There’s no way this would happen if it weren’t a dream. There’s no way that Orihara-san would say something like this.

Seriously, just what kind of dream is this? Am I feeling sexually frustrated? Or maybe how we stopped at the last second before is still lingering in my mind?

“Just sleep, Momota-kun... I’ll take care of everything.”

Oh, come on. My subconscious really doesn’t get it. Even if this is just a dream, Orihara-san being this aggressive is just kind of... I don’t know, it just makes her less attractive. She’s horribly out of character. I mean, she isn’t a slut. She isn’t

Kisaki-san, after all. When Orihara does this kind of thing, she gets embarrassed, and her face turns red right away, and it's the absolute cutest. It just isn't the same if she's too bold.

Sometimes she approaches me on her own, but what makes me so happy about that is how she does it in spite of how embarrassed she is. It's so adorable how she's willing to do her best for me when she's actually very embarrassed. It's not the same if she comes onto me so erotically like she's thrown away all her shame.

That's not to say it's completely wrong for her to come onto me so aggressively. I mean, if I said that as a man, I want to take the lead and don't want her to do it, I'd be lying. There's no mistake that I love normal Orihara-san the best, but as for a super aggressive Orihara-san... I'd probably be game for that. After all, this is a dream. It's a dream, so it wouldn't be a bad idea to try enjoying this slutty version of Orihara-san, who I'd be turned off by if this were reality. If it's in a dream, I might as well throw away my shame and do whatever I want! Or something like that...

I decided to enjoy my naughty dream like a pubescent high schooler; however, my consciousness gradually started to wake me up. That's when I had reality thrust at me and found out the horrible truth about why I was having such an erotic dream...

≡

"Hahn..."

In my slumber, I had heard the sound of someone sighing sweetly. But even though I was gradually regaining consciousness and returning to reality...the sensations on my body were the same as the ones in my dream. Chubby legs were wrapped around my own, slender fingers were touching all over my body, and overly large breasts were being pushed all up against me.

"Oh, you woke up." A sweet voice echoed in my ear while I was still half-asleep. "I'm sorry... Maybe it's because I'm still a little nervous, but I couldn't sleep...so I came to visit you."

"..."

“I know what I’m doing is shameful. But...I’m lonely. Because after today is over, I won’t be able to see you again for a little while.”

“...”

“I’m not in my stable period yet, so it would be best if we avoided going all the way...but please don’t worry. I’ll take care of you in every other way.”

“...”

“So, you can just lay back and relax. I’ll do everything for you. Don’t worry about a thing, and surrender your body to me, Shigeru-san,” she said like she was proclaiming her affection to her beloved, and in an instant, I was fully conscious.

“K-Kisaki-san...?!” Reflexively, I sat up and threw off the covers, and right there was Kisaki-san. The woman who was going to be my new mother, of all people, was aggressively wrapping herself around and touching the body of her new son, me. *This is way too extreme to be called mother and son bonding!*

“Aah! I’m sorry! Did I upset you? B-But I’m anxious, and this was the only thing I could do... Huh?” As she apologized, she took a hard look at my face. The room was pitch black, so it was pretty hard to see each other’s faces, but since our bodies were pressed so closely together, there was barely any distance between us. If you looked closely, you could at least see the other person’s face. “M-Momota-kun?! ”

“...What are you doing, Kisaki-san?” What spilled from my lips was a sigh of despair and words of dismay. *I hate this. I really hate this. What does she think she’s doing?* As I was truly fed up and appalled from the bottom of my heart, Kisaki-san got a look of extreme confusion and shame on her face.

“H-Huh? B-But this is Shigeru-san’s room, isn’t it? I was told his room was right up the stairs.”

“My father’s room is across the hallway...” As you climb the stairs, my room is on the right and my father’s room is on the left.



I don't know what my dad said, but he probably explained it simply, like "It's the room right next to the stairs." Between my room and my father's, mine is closest to the stairs so Kisaki-san probably got the two mixed up.

Yep. In other words, Kisaki-san was actually planning to quietly go to my dad's room when everyone had fallen asleep. I don't have to even think about—I don't even want to think about—what her goal was, since it could only be one thing.

"Were you going to my dad's room to have sex?"

"Y-You're wrong! That's not it! Um... I mean, I was lonely!"

It seems like I wasn't wrong at all.

"I've been seeing Shigeru-san less lately, and since I found out I'm pregnant, he's been concerned about my body and stopped doing that kind of thing with me..."

"I mean, husbands and wives do that kind of thing, so I'm totally fine with you wanting to, but...couldn't you have at least held out for today?" I was so sleepy and tired that I couldn't help but complain.

I mean, what is this situation? Why did she choose to try and jump my dad's bones now? Also, why did she fail? If you're going to do it, get it done without my sister or me finding out, please.

I probably shouldn't say this, but messing up spectacularly right at the critical moment is just like Orihara-san. I wonder if it's in their genes or something...

"B-But if I miss today, then I don't know when I'll be able to see him again! Also, even if I could see him again soon, it doesn't seem like it'd set the right kind of mood to travel somewhere just for that sort of thing..."

"Oh... I see..."

"Wh-Why do you look so disgusted?! Why are you looking at me like I'm some kind of vulgar creature?! I-I'm going to be your stepmom, you know?! Is that the kind of look you give your stepmom?!"

"...I feel like a stepmom wouldn't crawl underneath the covers of her son's bed."

“I said it was a mistake! You’re making fun of me... You think I’m a slutty milf too, don’t you, Momota-kun?”

“...”

“Why are you silently looking away? Can’t you follow that up with a lie at least?! Sob...” Kiseki-san finally started crying on my bed. “I hate this. Why did things have to turn out this way? I was just trying to be a good wife... I was trying to be a good stepmom!” Tears were streaming down her face. A part of me felt sorry for her, but honestly, I was the one who wanted to cry.

The time was already around two in the morning. It would be troublesome if we made any more noise and woke up my sister and dad, so, for the time being, I took the crying Kiseki-san down to the kitchen on the first floor. I didn’t want to drink any coffee or tea since it was late at night, and more importantly, I’d heard that caffeine isn’t good for a pregnant woman. So her choice of drink ended up being warm milk.

“Here you go.”

“Sniff... Thank you...” I offered Kiseki-san the milk I had warmed up in the microwave, and she accepted it as she sniffled. She blew her nose with a tissue, and it looked like she had calmed down a little bit. “Sniff... I’m sorry, Momota-kun, I’ve made such a disgrace of myself.”

I could only quietly reply, “It’s fine.” In truth, I wanted to shout, “You sure did!”

“Ahh, why did things turn out like this? When I heard that Shigeru-san has a teenage son, I thought I’d do my best to become a good mother so that he’d call me ‘mom.’ Who would have thought that his son was someone I already knew?”

“...”

“I wanted to be a prim and proper mother in front of his kids, but I can’t do that anymore. You’ve already figured out how I really am, Momota-kun. You also know that I was the one who invited him to a hotel to have a kid. How am I supposed to be a mother if I’m like this?!”

“...I’m sorry.” All I could do was apologize. It wasn’t like it was anyone’s fault,

but I felt sorry that I was the son in question.

This whole incident must have been really unexpected for Kisaki-san as well. It was a horrible accident that threw all her plans and preparations out of whack. I've been feeling pretty awkward myself, and I'm sure that she's feeling the same way. Her new son is the same person who she asked for love advice concerning lots of graphic stuff like going to hotels and physical relationships. "Awkward" is hardly the word for this.

"H-Hey, Momota-kun? There's just one thing I don't want you to get wrong about me... I did not try to crawl into your father's bed because I was sexually frustrated, okay?" Kisaki-san said shyly, but in a strong tone. "W-Well, I was a little bit, but the main reason was because I didn't want Shigeru-san to cheat on me."

"Cheat on you?"

"I-It's not like I don't believe Shigeru-san! It's not that... But I can't help feeling uneasy," Kisaki-san's voice became faint. "...I heard on TV and from people around me that there are a lot of men who cheat on their wives when they're pregnant. They said that because men can't do that type of stuff until the woman is in her stable period, a lot of them find other partners to do it with. Also, I heard that regardless of the stable period, a lot of guys stop being physically attracted to their wives when their stomachs get bigger."

"..."

"We haven't even known each other for half a year...so we've only been physically intimate a few times. Despite that, I got pregnant...and now I can't do it with him anymore. Shigeru-san is kind and considerate of my body's health and doesn't come asking for that kind of thing... But that also makes me feel really anxious..."

"..." A small part of me was getting fed up that she was starting another graphic conversation, but it seemed like she was more serious about things than I'd thought she was. It seemed like she had serious and earnest concerns. Kisaki-san seemed to have considerable trauma from her partner's affair; she wasn't joking around about any of this. The woman in front of me was genuinely concerned and truly anxious about this.

“So that’s why I thought I should squeeze him completely dry, so that he’d lose any desire to go after another woman.”

“...” *Sh-She’s not joking around...probably. What she’s saying makes sense...probably...*

“As his son, all I can say is, ‘please have faith in my dad.’”

“...I understand that. Shigeru-san is... He isn’t like my ex-husband. He’s not like that, and I want to believe in him. I know that, but...” In the wake of the tears that had spilled from her anxious eyes, a painful self-deprecating smile played on her lips. “I’m hopeless. I can’t help but think about things negatively. I’ve failed once, so it just makes me think harder about not wanting to mess up again.”

“Failed?”

“Yes, I failed. I told you before, right? In my first marriage, I chose the wrong person and got married to someone who wasn’t my soul mate. So it was a huge failure...”

“Are you sure about that?” I said. My words must have caught her off guard because Kisaki-san’s eyes went wide.

“Huh?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to say that your divorce was a mistake or defend your ex-husband... It’s just that...”

“It’s just what?”

“It’s just, there’s something that’s kind of been bothering me since I first heard your story at Orihara-san’s apartment. Back then, and even now, you’ve been saying you ‘chose the wrong person,’ right? The way you say you chose the wrong person and that they weren’t your soul mate... It’s almost like your first marriage was a failure and a mistake.”

In my mind, I was remembering what she’d said the other day, when she had dismissed Orihara-san’s and my love and our feeling that we could overcome anything together as just us being blinded by love. *“It happens all the time in real life: people will think they’ve found their soul mate when they actually*

haven't. It's unbelievable how much love can blind you, and I was the same way... I chose the wrong person. I thought the wrong person was my soul mate."

"...Honestly, I can't even imagine how much getting a divorce because of your husband's affair hurt you, Kisaki-san. It wouldn't be strange for you to be against marriage as a whole. But it just seems sad to write your whole experience off as a failure or say you chose the wrong person."

"Sad...?"

"Yes, sad. Because...you end up denying all the moments that you felt like you were in love with that person."

"That's..." Kisaki-san was at a loss for words.

Kisaki-san probably doesn't have any lingering affection for her ex-husband. Those feelings are long gone, and she's already looking toward the future. She'll be serious about loving my dad—probably. Still, despite what she may be thinking right now, it's the undeniable truth that she loved her ex-husband in the past.

"Wh-What are you trying to say, Momota-kun? Are you trying to say that it was a mistake that I divorced my ex-husband?" Kisaki-san frowned and sounded a little upset.

"No, that's not what I mean at all." I shook my head in a panic. "I'm not trying to preach to you. It's just, lately I've been thinking a lot about if there really is such a thing as a soul mate..."

"A soul mate..."

"At the end of the day, I think it's a matter of how you define the word 'soul mate,' but...I don't think that the kind of soul mate that everyone thinks about, the one where if you marry them your happiness is a sure thing, actually exists."

"..."

"My dad told me something a long time ago."

"Shigeru-san did?"

"He told me what you choose in life is actually less important than you think," I said, recalling what my father told me during my third year in middle school.

≡Chapter 6: The King and the Prince

“What you choose in life is actually less important than you think,” my father said. If I’m being honest, at the time I was a little upset. It felt like the path that I had chosen myself as a third year in middle school was being dismissed as not that important.

“...But why not?” I asked him. “Choices are really important, aren’t they? Aren’t there a lot of choices in your life that can affect your future?” *Life is a series of choices, and the series of choices you make is your life. The things that you choose will determine your life. Going to college, finding a job, falling in love... There’s a lot of important choices in life.*

“That’s right. What you choose is, of course, very important. But there’s something more important than what you choose.”

“Something more important...?”

“It’s what you do after you’ve made your choice. It doesn’t matter if you follow in my footsteps and run this clinic or choose another path. What you choose is up to you. What’s important isn’t which path you choose, but what you do after you’ve chosen.”

“...”

“Life isn’t like a quiz show, where you have two choices and one is right and one is wrong. It’s up to you to choose the path you take, and you may find success...or maybe you won’t be rewarded no matter which path you take or how hard you try. That’s just life.”

Because of his age, my father used a quiz show for his metaphor, but for me, choosing the route in a visual novel made more sense. *If this were a game, then there would definitely be a correct route. As long as the game wasn’t a really twisted one, if you continued to make the right choices, you’d always end up at the good ending and avoid the bad one. But life isn’t like a game, and there won’t always be right choices. And even if you keep making the right choices...*

“The bottom line is, there’s no such thing as a correct path that guarantees your success just because you chose it,” my father said with a deep sigh. They were the kind of words that only a man more than twice my age could say with such sentimentality and sadness. “No matter what path you choose, the most important thing is what you do after you’ve chosen it. How hard you can work and how long you’re able to remain steadfast on that path... I guess those are what determines your future.”

“...” I got lost in thought about his words and remained silent.

“...Ha ha. Maybe it’s the same as when you’re choosing a wife,” he said jokingly, laughing to himself. “Happiness from just being together, soul mates... Things that are that convenient probably don’t exist. No matter who you choose, what’s most important is how the two of you live together after you get married.” Both his tone and expression were bright, but his eyes had a hint of melancholy. “Kozue told me something when we got married.”

“Mom did?”

“A lot happened with her being pregnant with Kaede, and right when we finally got married and I thought we could relax, Kozue said to me, ‘Don’t think that this is the end.’”

“...” On their own, those words sounded scary. They sounded like something the final boss in a video game would say at the very end when they’re swearing revenge on the world after they’ve lost to the hero. But that wasn’t all she said.

“‘It all begins from here.’”

Taken together, those words had a nice ring to them. *Marriage isn’t the end. It’s not like the goal in a race or setting one foot in the grave. It’s where everything starts.*

“My mom has a good point.”

“Yeah. Well...things didn’t last too long after they began, though,” my father added, and there was an indescribable sadness in his voice.



“Shigeru-san said that?” After hearing my story, Kisaki-san got a pensive look

on her face.

“I think my dad mostly wanted to talk about my career path and just mentioned marriage and choosing a wife while he was at it... However, lately I’ve been thinking a lot about how the most important things in love come after you start dating.”

They come after you start dating, after you’re married, or after you choose your partner.

Some time ago, I told Ibusuki, “I don’t know what the past me would have chosen. Myself right now, however... Even if I could redo my life a million times, I’d want to fall in love with Orihara-san.”

Even if I could redo my life over a million times, I’d want to fall in love with Orihara-san. I would want to choose her every one of those million times.

However, even if I was able to choose Orihara-san a million times, that wouldn’t be the end. Everything would start from there. If you choose someone a million times, you have to face them a million times with sincerity. The choice itself is neither right nor wrong, but afterward, everything will change. No matter how wonderful that person is, if you don’t treat them with sincerity, they’ll hate you. By the same token, even if that person is someone who isn’t a good match for you, or even if it’s a forbidden relationship that the world is really opposed to, you may be able to make it work depending on what you do.

“What’s most important is what you do after you start dating, after you get married, or after the two of you start your relationship. So, I think it’s pretty rare that a relationship’s success or failure is decided right when you start dating.”

“...”

“Um, so what I’m trying to say is...” I scratched my head as I spoke. I didn’t know if saying something like this was the best conclusion for this conversation or if I even should say it. However, I thought that I’d say the thing I most wanted to tell Kiseki-san right now. “L-Let’s both do our best from here on out.”

“Both of us?”

“You and I... We both probably feel like the person we’re in love with right

now is our soul mate, and no one else could take their place.”

“ ...”

“But it’s probably like you said: love is making us blind, and that’s a mistake that a lot of people who fall in love make. Still, let’s just accept that we’re blinded by love and do our best. It doesn’t matter if they’re our soul mate or not. What’s most important is what we do from now on.”

That’s right, from here on out. Just choosing who you’ll be with doesn’t decide anything. Everything is decided by what you do after you’ve chosen them.

“From now on...”

“It’s much harder for us than it is for you though, Kisaki-san. We have a lot of hurdles to overcome... In the first place, you haven’t even acknowledged us, Kisaki-san.”

“...” Kisaki-san didn’t say anything as she faced the ground. Silence filled the kitchen, yet it didn’t feel like an awkward silence.

“Well... I’m going to bed.”

“...Yeah. Good night, Momota-kun.” She shook her head. “I mean, ‘Good night, Kaoru-kun,’” she said, rephrasing it like she was my family.

I was still too embarrassed to call her “Mom,” so all I said was, “...Good night.” and left the kitchen.



It was the early afternoon, and I was sitting in the passenger seat of Shigeru-san’s car when I made a phone call to someone I thought I’d never call again.

“Hello? Long time no see.”

“ ...”

“Yes, it has been a long time. I wonder how long it’s been since I last saw you.”

“ ...”

“...Come on, you don’t have to act so scared, do you? I’m not going to bother you for money, so you don’t have to worry. I’ve already gotten what I’m

supposed to get from you, and I don't plan on asking you for a single yen more than that."

"..."

"Well, it's not really anything important, but I just wanted to let you know something."

"..."

"I'm getting remarried."

"..."

"Yes, remarried. I met someone nice recently."

"..."

"He really is nice. The truth is... I'm already pregnant."

"..."

"I was really surprised. It happened so easily. I mean, I couldn't get pregnant with you, and we even fought about having infertility treatment. Oh... I'm sorry. I'm not criticizing you; I was just reminiscing about that time."

"..."

"How about you? Have you gotten remarried, or...?"

"..."

"Oh, really? Well, that does happen."

"..."

"...No. It really is nothing, but I just wanted to let you know. Even though we're over, we were married once."

"..."

"You know, ever since we got divorced, I've regretted our marriage and thought I failed to choose the right person... But it occurred to me that it might be wrong to say that my marriage to you was a mistake."

"..."

“Of course, I don’t have feelings for you anymore, and I don’t want to get back together with you... But writing off the fact that I loved you as a mistake is hollow...and unfair. I mean, chalking everything up to ‘I chose the wrong person’ when I had my own faults just isn’t right.”

“ ... ”

“Well, no matter how you think about it, you’re the one who’s most at fault for cheating on me.”

“ ... ”

“It’s true. Reflect on what you did and don’t cheat on anyone anymore.”

“ ... ”

“I’ve changed...? Yes, that’s probably true. A lot’s happened, but right now I’m really happy. So, I think I’m going to do my best to be happy.”

“ ... ”

“Let’s both do our best. Goodbye, Hoshino-san.” I hung up. I didn’t use the name I used to call him by; I called him by his last name, like a stranger.

“Are you done, Kisaki?” Shigeru-san asked me from the driver’s seat. He called me by my name without adding “-san.” He was always like this when we’re alone together, but he’ll speak formally when we’re in front of Kaoru-kun or Kaede-chan. It seems like he’s still a little shy and uncomfortable with calling me by my first name in front of the kids.

“Yes, I’m done.” After I stayed the night, Shigeru-san was giving me a ride to my parent’s house. Right now, we were in the parking lot of a convenience store that I had him stop at on the way there. It was there that, after getting permission from Shigeru-san, I made a phone call to my ex-husband. “I’m sorry for being so selfish.”

“It’s okay. It’s not a big deal.”

“I feel like I shouldn’t have bothered you to make time for something like this, but...it’s just that I’d feel unfaithful if I called my ex-husband behind your back.”

“I’m not the kind of guy who worries about little things like that,” he said in a huff, but I think he was just putting on a tough guy act. When I said I wanted to

call my ex-husband, he looked a little uneasy. *He he. He's jealous.*

“But yeah... That made me feel better.”

I looked down at my ex-husband's phone number on my smartphone. I hadn't deleted his number...but it wasn't because I was still in love with him. I was going to delete it right after the divorce, but I hesitated, thinking that I might need to contact him for alimony or something like that, and I left it that way until today.

I didn't mean to dwell on the past, and I didn't mean to look back. But thinking about it, keeping his number was probably me standing in place and not looking toward the future. I'd decided that that part of my life was a failure and a mistake, and I'd tried to force myself to forget about it. Just because one thing went wrong, I'd decided everything was a failure and kept looking away. I'd tried to simply sweep it all under the rug; I'd had the convenient excuse that there was nothing I could do because he wasn't my soul mate.

“...”

I navigated my smartphone and deleted his number. However, I didn't do it to forget him or to bury what had happened as my dark past. *I'm going to accept everything, the bad and the good, and go forward. Right now, that's what I feel like I truly want to do.*

“Shigeru-san, there's a place I'd like to stop by on our way to my parents' house.”

“What?” Shigeru-san said with a puzzled look on his face. “But isn't it better if we don't do that type of stuff until you're in your stable period?”

“...No, I don't mean that.” *Hmm. Apparently, he thinks I mean I want to stop by a love hotel. It's so sad...but it's what I deserve, so I can't say anything...*

“I want to go to her grave.”

“Her grave...?”

“I want to properly introduce myself to Kozue-san as well.”

After looking a little surprised, Shigeru-san nodded. “Okay.” He placed his left hand on the gear shift to start the car, and then I placed my right hand on top of

his hand.

“Let’s be happy, Shigeru-san.” I looked straight into his eyes. “Let’s all do our best to become a happy family. You, Kaede-chan, Kaoru-kun, me...and the child inside of me.”

“...Yeah,” Shigeru-san nodded like he was reflecting on what I’d said. As I let go of his hand, he shifted gears, and the car slowly pulled forward.



I got a phone call from my older sister the night after she stayed over at Momota-kun’s house.

“...So, the sleepover ended without any problems?”

“Yes, thanks to you. Your cooking was a big hit.”

“That’s a relief. I wasn’t too worried though. Momota-kun texted me about it before bed.”

“...Y-Yeah,” my sister said, stumbling over her words for some reason. Her reaction was awkward...almost as if after Momota-kun had texted me, something unusual and really hard to explain had happened. “Hey, Hime-chan. Do you have time right now?”

“Uh... What? Yes, I’m good right now.”

“Okay, then how about we talk for a while?” she said in a very gentle voice.

First, we talked about old times.

“I’ve been packing a lot of stuff since I got back because I’ll be moving in with Shigeru-san in the next month or so. When I was doing that, I found some old albums, so I stopped to look at them.”

“Oh, that happens all the time when you clean up.”

“Wow, this takes me back. You were so chubby back then, Hime-chan.”

“H-Hey, cut it out! Don’t make me remember stuff from high school.”

“You really slimmed down. Wasn’t your whole thing that you really wanted to lose weight so you could fit in your kimono?”

“...Yeah. It was a hand-me-down from you, though.”

“It wasn’t a hand-me-down! Mom and dad bought it for the both of us. I just wore it a little sooner than you did.”

“Puh tay toh, puh tah toh. I feel like I was always talked into using all of your old stuff like that.”

“You may be right, but there were a lot of things that our parents bought for you first, weren’t there? All of the video game consoles in our house are yours, Hime.”

“...Well, that’s true.”

“Speaking of video games... You used to bawl your eyes out whenever we played video games against each other and I won.”

“Th-That was when I was in elementary school!”

“Didn’t you cry until you were in middle school?”

“B-Because! It was really, really frustrating losing to you when you didn’t even play video games at all...”

“Even though you play all those video games, you were never really good at fighting games, huh?”

“...Oh, shut up.”

“Oh hey. I found a picture from when you were job hunting. Wow, you’re so young and innocent! It also looks like you’re still not used to wearing a suit. It’s more like the suit is wearing you.”

“Ugh... Cut it out already. This is no fair! You’re the only one looking at the album!”

Next, we talked about Shigeru-san.

“So, you’re going to register your marriage next week?”

“Yes, we’re going to turn it in on a lucky day according to the lunar calendar. Dad signed our paperwork as the witness today.”

“...Did dad say anything? I mean...he didn’t have any comments about the shotgun wedding or how you guys are doing things out of order?”

“No, not at all. If it were my first marriage, maybe he would have, but I’m a divorcée in my thirties, you know? He was just really happy that he was finally going to have a grandchild.”

“Ha ha, well, I’m glad it worked out then.”

“Mom already started buying a bunch of things for the baby, like bottles and clothes. Since I’m still not in my stable period, I told her not to tell any of her friends, though...”

“...You really can’t relax until you’re stable, huh?”

“Yeah. There’s always a possibility that I’ll miscarry. I’m just barely below the threshold for advanced maternal age, and I’m definitely not young either.”

“I-It’ll be okay...probably.”

“Thank you.”

“D-Don’t worry about it all by yourself! I don’t think stress is good for the baby, after all. If something happens, please tell me right away.”

“Thanks. Well...the thing that worries me the most is you and Kaoru-kun, though.”

“Ha ha ha...”

Then we talked about Momota-kun.

“...When you stop and think about it, it really is something. I mean, you and Kaoru-kun are...twelve years apart, right?”

“...It’s not twelve years. It’s eleven years and ten months.”

“Are you guys even able to have a conversation?”

“We are...though sometimes I’ll feel despair from the unavoidable generation gap between us. He’ll say stuff like ‘I’ve never touched a videotape.’”

“I see...”

“And then he’ll act surprised when he finds out that I’ve used floppy disks.”

“Ah... I see...”

“The other day I was shocked when he said he didn’t know who L’Arc-en-Ciel

and Porno Graffiti were.”

“Wh-What?! There’s someone in Japan who doesn’t know about those two giants of music?! L’Arc-en-Ciel and Porno Graffiti are mandatory Japanese education!”

“...He said he didn’t know anything about them.”

“N-No way... B-But Kaoru-kun does stuff like read manga, doesn’t he? Hasn’t he seen the *Full Metal Alchemist* anime? That anime was legendary, and its opening and ending songs were amazing! I was hooked on it even though I wasn’t an otaku.”

“...He said he’s never seen it.”

“...Wait. Y-Yeah, that must be it. Someone from Kaoru-kun’s generation would have watched the second anime.”

“...No. He said that the second anime wasn’t from his time either.”

“What...?”

“Hey, Onee-chan. Did you know that the second *Full Metal Alchemist* anime...is over ten years old?”

“...”

“It’s so depressing...”

“I-It is...”

We then talked some more about Momota-kun.

“By the way, Onee-chan... Why did you suddenly start calling him ‘Kaoru-kun’?”

“Why? Well, that’s all I can call him, isn’t it? I can’t call him by his last name in front of Shigeru-san, after all.”

“Oh, I see.”

“...When I slept over, I accidentally called him ‘Momota-kun,’ and it made things really weird. I’ll never call him by his last name again.”

“Hmph.”

“What? You seem unhappy about that.”

“I mean...even though I’m still calling him ‘Momota-kun,’ you’re calling him by his first name.”

“You should just call him by his first name too then, right?”

“Yes, but...”

“Hmm?”

“...If I call him by his first name, he’ll call me by my first name too.”

“Oh, it’s that you don’t like being called by your first name? Now that you mention it, you’ve always told me that you don’t really like your name.”

“No... I think the bad feelings I had about my name have pretty much disappeared since I started dating Momota-kun... It’s not really that I don’t like him using my name, it’s more the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“I-I get so happy.”

“...”

“He’s called me by my name before, and it just made me so happy, it was weird... One day, I want us to call each other by our first names, so I’m wondering what I should do...”

“Right... Cool story.”

“Wait, no! I wasn’t bragging! I’m seriously worried about it!”

After that, we just talked about things of no importance. We chatted about all sorts of stuff, and none of it was all that special or remarkable.

Talking to my sister like this about whatever was a little refreshing. Even though my sister had been staying over at my apartment a lot recently, she’d...never been one to strike up unnecessary conversation. Since we’re family and we’d lived together for a long time, silence wasn’t a problem for us. Our relationship was the kind where we didn’t need to fill space with a conversation to avoid awkwardness. So, yeah, it was kind of refreshing for us to talk like this.

Come to think of it, there was another time before where we'd had a long phone call like this. I believe it was the night before my sister's wedding. On the day right before she'd married her ex-husband, we'd talked on the phone a whole lot...

"...Hey, Hime-chan," my sister began. It was about two hours after we had started our chat, when we had finally run out of things to say and there was a little bit of silence. She said something to me as if she had just thought of it. Her tone was the same one she'd been using in our chat. It was the way she always sounded, kind and gentle.

"I approve of you and Kaoru-kun," she told me.

At first, I didn't understand. "Wh-What?"

"I'm saying I approve of you and Kaoru-kun dating," she said, truly casually. "Well, I say I 'approve,' but I just mean I'm not going to say anything about it anymore, and I won't be against you. Of course, I don't know what other people will say, and I don't know if I can help you when that happens. However, I won't oppose your relationship anymore."

"..."

"What's wrong? You're not happy?"

She was so against it! Even when we made up after our fight, she was still adamant about it. "What's this all of a sudden...?"

"Well, no matter what I say, you two aren't going to break up, right?"

"R-Right..."

"Then there's no point to it. Being against you two has started to get ridiculous, and I have my own hands full, so I don't have time to deal with you guys anymore," she said in a very light tone. But then she lowered her voice. "...In the end, it's just like you said, Hime-chan. There's a lot of reasons for me to oppose your relationship, like the law and public opinion, but...in the end, I was just projecting myself onto you. I didn't want you to go through the same thing that I did. I didn't want you to have to experience the kind of despair that comes from having the man you care about, the man you swore your love to,

being taken away by a young woman.”

“Onee-chan...”

“I was worried. I imagined this future where, even if things are good now, one day Kaoru-kun’s love for you would subside, and he’d throw away his girlfriend that’s twelve years older than him and leave for a younger woman. I couldn’t trust Kaoru-kun.”

“...” It was painful how well I understood my sister’s feelings. I’d always held that fear too. *It’s not that I don’t trust Momota-kun, but in the future, when I’ve become even more of an old lady than I am now, what will he think of me? As he gets older and becomes more mature and better looking, will I really be able to keep pace and become prettier?*

“But I’m sure it will be okay,” my sister said in a warm, gentle voice that seemed to brush aside my fears. “With him, it’ll be fine. He understands what’s most important in love. Much more than I do...”

“...”

“Well, on the very off chance that you get dumped, it would be a good experience in its own way. Your life won’t be over just because you messed up once in love. You should just get back on your feet and find a new love.”

“...Yeah. But Momota-kun and I are never going to break up.”

“Everyone says that when things are going well. Being blinded by love makes you do that,” she said, repeating the same harsh words she said before.

“However, it’s important that the two of you accept that blindness and work hard together. Kaoru-kun told me that.”

“Momota-kun did...?”

“He’s a great guy.”

“...Yeah, he is.”

“That’s Shigeru-san’s son for you, all right.”

“Ha ha ha. Hey, no bragging.”

“It’s fine, isn’t it? Up until now, you’ve talked my ear off bragging about the

two of you, after all.” We both laughed at each other, like two normal sisters you could find anywhere.

“Well... I guess I should hang up. It’s gotten pretty late.”

“Yeah. U-Um, Onee-chan...congratulations on your wedding and your baby.”



“What’s gotten into you?”

“No, it’s just...so much happened that I never got a chance to properly say it to you.”

After a brief silence, my sister said, “Thank you, Hime-chan.” It sounded like she was holding back tears, but also like she was very happy.

≡ Epilogue

Apparently, unbeknownst to me, Kisaki-san had approved of our relationship.

“It’s not like I’ve completely let you guys off the hook. This is just my silent consent.” It was two days after Kisaki-san stayed over at my house, and she was giving me a phone call to tell me about all the conditions that came with her approval. “First, you guys need to tell Shigeru-san as soon as you find the right time to do it. I’ll go with his decision, so if he’s against you two, so am I.”

Well, I guess this is only natural. Just thinking about it makes me depressed, though. Imagine dad’s point of view. The fact that his son is going out with a woman twelve years older than him is enough of a shock, and then you add on that said girlfriend is the little sister of his new wife... And we started dating before they did, and he’s already met Orihara-san when I introduced her as my friend’s older sister. In other words, this is an unimaginably messy situation.

I have no idea how he’ll react when he finds out about us. I guess it’s a path we can’t avoid taking, though, so we’ll eventually find the right opportunity and just do it. I don’t know if there’s a right time to do something like that, but one day I will do it...

“Second, be careful to not let yourselves be found out.”

That’s also to be expected. We’ve been pretty laid-back lately, so we should be more careful. Since Orihara-san is really going to become my aunt, it’ll probably be easier than before to pretend we’re relatives. Still, it doesn’t hurt to be careful.

“Third, be aware that you’re just a high school student, and have a romance like a student would.”

To be more specific, this meant stuff like no sleepovers, no dates past eight o’clock, and if my grades fall, I’d have a lot of restrictions added.

“From now on, I’m going to be your mother, Kaoru-kun. And I plan on being a stickler about those kinds of things.”

Well, that's also natural I suppose... I've been too laid-back up until now, and it's about time to be a little more reserved.

Kisaki-san then added, "...As long as Shigeru-san and I don't find out, I don't care what you two do. After all, I don't think I could stop you if I tried," and I thought that was totally something she'd say.

Lastly, she said, "Fourth... I want you to be happy."

In a way, that was her hardest condition to meet, but also the one that definitely had to be met.

Thus, the whole affair somehow came to an end. I was happy and relieved, but...personally, I was a little disappointed since I had just come up with a plan to convince Kisaki-san to accept us. First off, I was going to tell her how much I was seriously in love with Orihara-san by reading her a poem about my passionate feelings... In the end, my poem strategy was dead on arrival. *Hmm... I even wrote a good one. Well, whatever.*

After the recent, chaotic events that had happened, we finally found some peace. Time passed, and so came the end of September and my sixteenth birthday.

"Happy birthday, Momota-kun!" Orihara-san said, and the sound of a party popper filled the room. It was six o'clock, and just the two of us were in Orihara-san's apartment. There was a lavish party spread prepared by Orihara-san on the dining table along with a small cake.

"Thank you, Orihara-san."

"Seriously...congratulations. I'm so, so happy that you're sixteen."

"A-Are you really that happy?"

"Yes! You've turned sixteen. That means you're one year older!"

"Oh."

"And I'm still twenty-seven years old!" Orihara-san said very excitedly. "This means that our age gap is now...eleven years! Not twelve, but eleven! Now I don't have to say, 'It's not a full zodiac cycle, it's eleven years and ten months,'

and sound like a sore loser!”

“...”

“Yeah, I know when it’s December I’ll be a year older and everything will go back to normal. I just want to enjoy this small miracle that doesn’t last for more than a little over two months, ha ha ha...” After getting herself all hyped up, Orihara-san proceeded to plummet down into the dumps. The highs and lows of her excitement were so intense I couldn’t really keep up.

After having a good conversation and a good meal, the time had finally come for my birthday present.

“U-Um... Don’t really get your hopes up too high, okay?” After being so happy, Orihara-san suddenly began to squirm. “With what’s happened with my sister, I didn’t really have a lot of time. I’ve been thinking about what to get for forever, but the more I thought about it, the more I couldn’t decide what to do. Just when I started to think that this wasn’t it, I ran out of time to buy something else...”

“You don’t have to be so modest... I’m happy with whatever you’ve chosen, Orihara-san.”

“...Really? You mean really really?”

“Really.”

“You definitely won’t laugh?”

“I won’t laugh.”

“Hmm... Okay... Here you go.” Gathering her courage, Orihara-san handed over the present to me. It was a small, neatly wrapped vertical box.

“May I open it?”

“Y-Yes...” After receiving her permission, I opened it. What came out first was a box that was the size of a glasses case, and what was inside was...

“Is this...a ballpoint pen?”

“I-It’s a fountain pen!”

“This is a fountain pen?” When I think of a fountain pen, I imagine a pen that’s

black or blue with a gold line running along its body to give it a dignified and luxurious appearance. However, this fountain pen had a translucent body. The barrel gave it the feel of a fountain pen, but...it had a trendy, futuristic design that made it not look like a fountain pen, in a good way.

“Apparently it’s a high-tech fountain pen. Someone at my office uses it, and they said it’s really easy to use. It’s not that expensive, but it’s high-class stationery...”

I could hear the nervousness and anxiety in her voice as she continued. “I-I gave this a lot of thought, you know? I wanted to get you something you would be able to carry with you every day... But I thought something like an expensive wallet or bag wouldn’t really fit a student, and I didn’t want to get anything too cheap either. So, what I came up with was some stationery that’s a little high-end...”

“I see. Yeah, this is nice. It’s really cool.”

“It wouldn’t be unusual for you to carry around a fountain pen, and you’ll have more opportunities to use it in the future, won’t you?”

“You’re right. I have a lot of writing to do.”

“...Yeah. Also, you know...two years from now?”

“Two years from now? ...Oh, yeah, when I become a third year, there’ll be a lot of times where I can’t use a mechanical pencil, like when I write my college application.”

“Yes, that’s true, but... Hey, come on, you know...” Orihara-san said as she blushed and fidgeted with her fingers. “Momota-kun...you made a promise to me about something you’re going to do two years from now.”

“Huh? Two years from now? You don’t mean...?”

“Yes, our marriage certificate!” Orihara-san said, looking embarrassed but happy. “You promised to sign it when you turn eighteen, right, Momota-kun? So, when you do, I thought it would be nice if you could use this fountain pen. I thought it would be wonderfully romantic if the pen you use to sign our wedding certificate would be the first fountain pen I gave you.”

“...”

“...That was a joke. I’m sorry, none of this happened. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. Please forget all of it... This was really cringy. You’re turned off, right? I called something this clingy ‘romantic’...” As I was at a loss for what to say because of her shocking words, Orihara-san kept apologizing to me with an embarrassed, despairing look on her face.

So, my first birthday present from my girlfriend since we started dating is a fountain pen, and she bought it with the intention of having me use it to sign a marriage certificate... No, this is... Yeah. Even for me, this is...

“...P-Pretty clingy.”

“...?! I-I’m sorry... I’ll get you a more normal present! J-Just give that back to me...!” Orihara-san reached for the fountain pen with a tearful look in her eyes, but I swerved to avoid her grasp.

“I’m not giving it back. I really like it.”

“Huh...? B-But you said I was being clingy.”

“You were, but it feels nice. I love how cringy you are when you’re so clingy.”

“...What? Is that supposed to be a compliment?” I intended to compliment her, but Orihara-san got a really confused look on her face.

“When I turn eighteen, let’s use this to sign our marriage certificate.”

“...Okay.”

“Until then, let’s somehow convince everyone about us—”

“—and make everyone happy,” Orihara-san said, finishing my sentence, and I nodded in agreement.

With nothing left to say, there was silence. I beckoned to her, and without a word she leaned in closer. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders.

“I love you, Hime.”

“Um... Oh...” Orihara-san’s face was bright red, and her gaze wandered around the room. “I-I love you too...K-Kaoru-kun,” she said awkwardly. “No fair! You surprised me.”

“It’s not unfair.”

“But...” She pouted and puffed out her cheeks, but soon a smile she couldn’t hold back broke out onto her face. Then we... Well, you could say that we spent some happy time together. The curfew of eight p.m. that my new mom placed on me meant we couldn’t do anything too adult, but it was still more than enough to make me happy.

The fact that Orihara-san and I were able to share the same thoughts and proceed in the same direction was a happiness that couldn’t be replaced by anything else. I didn’t know what would happen from here on out. However, I felt like if we were together, we could overcome any obstacle. Maybe I was a little crazy from how love had made me blind. But I wanted to accept all of that and move forward with her to the future.



Afterword

There are many important choices in life, and the majority of us will make our choices after serious consideration. Life isn't like a visual novel: you can't save or load your life, and there are no alternate routes. You can only go forward on the path you've chosen. That being the case, life is also unlike a visual novel, in that everything is unlikely to be decided by choices alone. In visual novels, if you choose the wrong route, that's the end of the story; in reality, however, you can probably make it all work out with your own effort. By the same token, even if you choose the guaranteed successful route, a small mistake could ruin everything. The choices you make are important, but what's more important is what you do after you've chosen, just like your career path or your love life.

And with that, I'm Kota Nozomi, and this is the fifth installment of the rom-com with an age gap.

The main focus this time was on the Orihara sisters, who are twenty-seven years old and thirty-four years old. I'm not really sure whether or not this was a story about women being princesses at heart no matter how old they get. To be frank, even I, the author, had no idea how I was going to resolve the bomb I dropped at the end of volume four. When my supervisor asked me, "How are you going to bring this all together?" I said, "Who knows? I'm sure I'll think of it when I write volume five," and thus put everything on my future self. At the end of the day, I think it all worked out, though.

I mentioned a few laws and things this time, but this work is set in a fictional prefecture in the southern part of Tohoku, so the laws are just that, the laws of a fictional prefecture. They have nothing to do with real laws, so please understand.

The next volume will be about the school festival, and it will delve into relationships that aren't between Momo and Hime. However, this is me we're talking about, so everything is undecided. The me who writes the sixth volume will do their best.

Now, it's time for a sudden, messy announcement corner. Please look forward to the manga as well! Also, please look forward to my other works from other companies! Also, look forward to my new work coming from GA Bunko in April! Of course, the main heroine will be older too! The age gap is one year! It's a rom-com about a senior and junior in high school!

Now then, my thanks. To my supervisor, thank you once again for your help. I look forward to working with you on the next work. To Nanasemeruchi, thank you again for your wonderful illustrations. The sleeveless version of the cover is really precious. Also, I would like to give my deepest gratitude to you, the reader who picked up this book. May our paths cross again in volume six.

—Kota Nozomi



**Are You Okay
With a Slightly
Older Girlfriend?**

**~You're Never Too Old
to Be a Princess~**

vol.
5

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Kota Nozomi
Illustrator
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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[≡Prologue](#)

[♥Chapter 1: The Princess's Secret Love Gets Found Out](#)

[≡Chapter 2: The Princess Gets Into an Argument](#)

[≡Chapter 3: The Princess Goes to a Love Hotel](#)

[≡Chapter 4: Thumbelina Is Also Doing Her Best](#)

[≡Chapter 5: Princess Kisaki Comes to Stay the Night](#)

[≡Chapter 6: The King and the Prince](#)

[≡Epilogue](#)

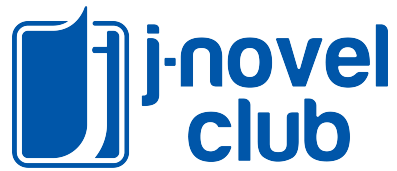
[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High-Resolution Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Are You Okay With a Slightly Older Girlfriend? Vol. 5

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by Kota Nozomi

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